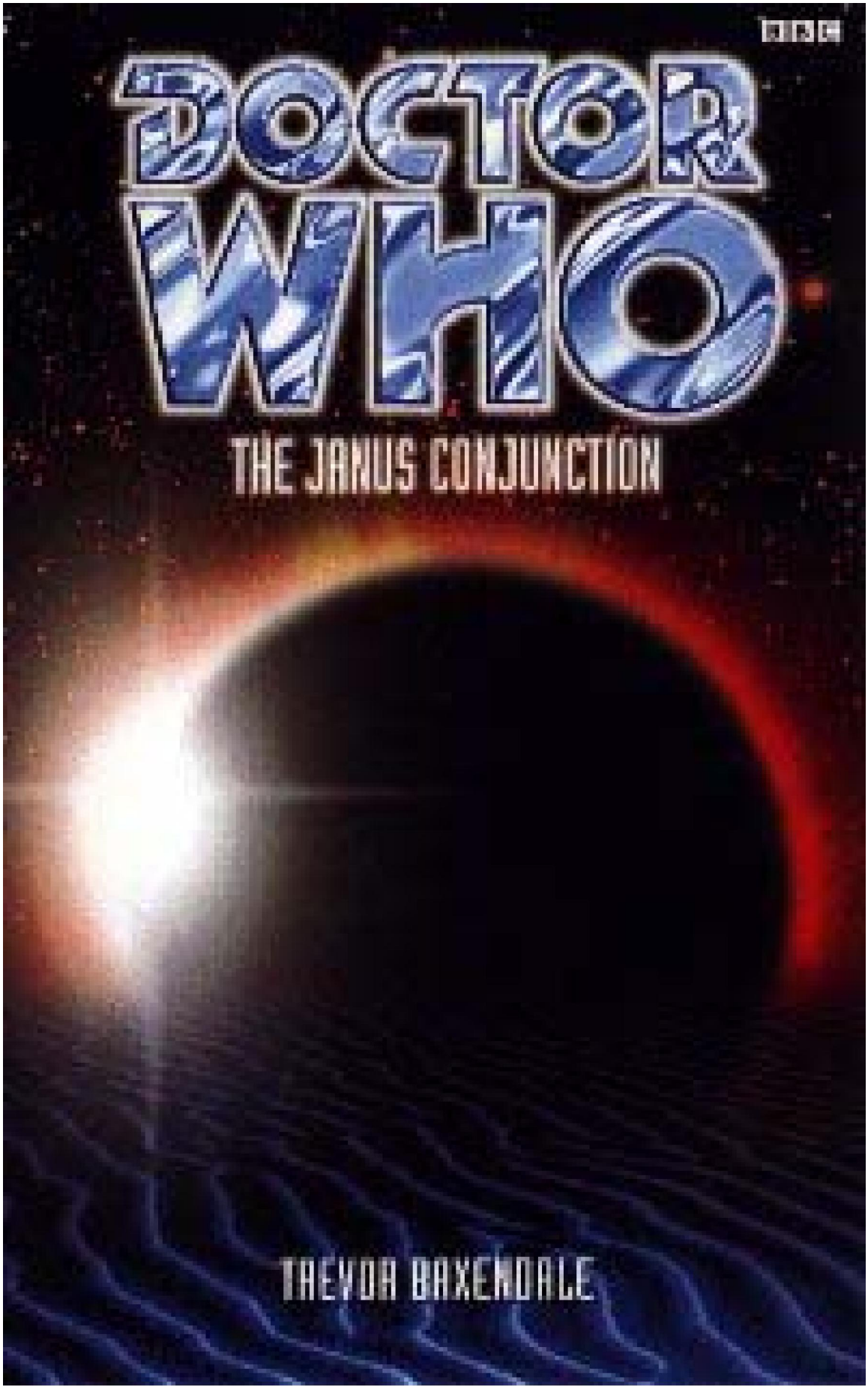
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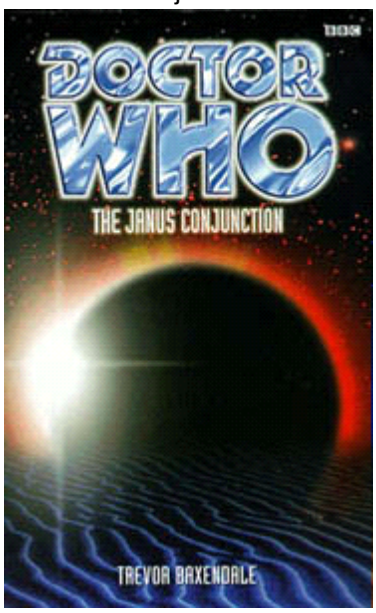
The Janus Conjunction



An Eighth Doctor Ebook
By Trevor Baxendale

Contents

Chapter 1 . . . . . Escape and Evasion
Chapter 2 . . . . . .Fire in the Sky
Chapter 3 . . . . . .Escape to....?
Chapter 4 . . . . . Janus Prime
Chapter 5 . . . . . .Menda
Chapter 6 . . . . . Strange Radiation
Chapter 7 . . . . . Zemler's World
Chapter 8 . . . . . Runner
Chapter 9 . . . . . .Spider Fight
Chapter 10 . . . . . Here We Go Again
Chapter 11 . . . . . Lock-up
Chapter 12 . . . . . Regarding Henry Chapter 13 . . .Thanks for the Memory
Chapter 14 . . . . . Return to Menda
Chapter 15 . . .The Moons and the Star
Chapter 16 . . . . . .No Turning Back
Chapter 17 . . . . . .The Worst
Chapter 18 . . . . . Moonfall
Chapter 19 . . . . . .The Last Death
Chapter 20 . . . . . The Hard Road
Acknowledgments

The Janus Conjunction
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Chapter One
Escape and Evasion

They were waiting for a dawn that would never come. Not the warm, bright arrival of a new day, but rather the first glimmer of hope that they might actually survive the night.

And there was a sad, sick irony to that, too, thought Julya as she sat clutching her rifle and staring up at the black sky. Because it was a black sky, not a night sky. The burnt-orange ring she could see above her was the faint corona of Janus Prime's bloated sun, hidden by the planet's single fixed-orbit moon. A permanent eclipse. Never-ending night.

The distant fire of a sun with only half a million or so years left to burn could do nothing, therefore, to illuminate the planet. The only light came from the ground at their feet - luminous sand giving off the faint blue glow that lent everything on Janus Prime an insubstantial, ghostly quality.

The face opposite her reflected this eerie luminescence from chin and nose, reminding Julya of childhood pranks, fooling around with torches and lamplight. But Lunder looked deathly pale, and there seemed to be fear even in his eyes.

Suddenly, Lunder began to move.With the barest rustle of combat fatigues, the commando clambered up the slope that led out of the basement and took up position by the observation point.

When Lunder peered through the hole in the wall, he could see three of the roving spider cyborgs. They were crawling slowly through the ruins, keeping to a strict military search formation. The nearest one was so close he could hear its sensor equipment clicking and whirring.

As quietly as he could manage, Lunder slid down the rubble to where Julya waited. She was looking up at him, her dust-grey face expectant.

'Three spidroids,' he murmured, his voice barely a whisper. Even at this distance, hidden in the ruins, voices could be overheard by the droids' sensitive aural detectors. 'Stay low. They may pass.'

Julya looked suitably disgusted. She was impatient to move on. Sitting in a hole like this, waiting to be found, would be nerve-racking for even the most seasoned veteran. For Julya, never trained for combat, the pressure was beginning to show.'Can't we move now? They won't be expecting it.'

'Quiet,' whispered Lunder.

Julya fiddled nervously with her rifle. A heavy silence fell like a blanket over the ruins, but if they listened carefully they could pick up the gentle hum of the spidroids, sensors sweeping, tracking, computer brains calculating possible hiding places and scanning every inch. It could only be a matter of time before they were discovered.

Lunder moved across to Julya and crouched down beside her. 'Keep your cool. We'll be all right if we stay calm and just wait for Vigo.'

Julya shook her head.'He's not coming back. Vigo's gone. He's dead, or he's captured.' She looked up at Lunder, her green eyes imploring him to do something. But Lunder had no answers. He checked his chronometer so that he didn't have to meet her gaze any longer.

Vigo was the team's point man; he had been gone for far too long now. Lunder told himself that, most likely, Vigo was trapped, like they were, waiting for a squad of spidroids to pass by before he could rejoin them. Radio communication was impossible, so they had no option but to sit it out. One thing was certain: they couldn't leave him behind.

***

Thirty kilometres away, a short-range airship took off from the blast-hardened landing pad with a howling scream. The noise of its VTOL engines reverberated through the vessel, and the twenty men sitting in its belly could feel the heavy vibrations through their boots. The spidroids had the Mendans cornered, and now it was their turn to get some exercise at last. They had been cooped up in the base for long enough.

Sergeant Jon Moslei was not in a good mood. In his opinion, the Mendans should never have been allowed to get out of the base area in the first place, and this ridiculous chase was just wasting valuable resources.

It was hard to believe that he'd been here only a year. He knew he'd be trapped here for the rest of his life, however long that turned out to be.

Invisibly, behind the reflective red visor of his helmet, Moslei closed his eyes and killed that particular line of thought. It didn't pay to think ahead any more. All you could hope for was a quick death, and the chance to choose how it came. On Janus Prime, both were unlikely. But as the Craab-class troopship banked away from the base and headed for the ruins, Sergeant Moslei stared at the rows of soldiers before him and felt a small grudging thrill of pride; this kind of exercise wouldn't be much of a challenge for them, he knew, but it was good to see the lads in action. Maybe one last time.

***

Lunder picked up his ripgun and quickly examined it, checking it was in full working order. There could be no room for mistakes, no faulty equipment. He checked the magazine, the firing mechanism, the power charge, and then Julya.

She was tired, drawn, and the sweat had turned the dust into grey streaks down her face. Her hair, black and tied into a short bunch on top of her head, was in need of washing. She looked gorgeous, he thought.

She got up and walked carefully across the broken masonry to join him. 'So. What do you really think? D'you think they've got him?' she asked.

'I told you.Vigo will come through in a minute. Soon as it's safe.' Julya picked up her own gun and examined it in a brief echo of Lunder's own check. 'Have you thought of calling him? Just to be sure?'

'No chance. The spidroids would pick up the signal burst straight away. There's enough of them out there now to triangulate our position in a second. We'd be dead before I'd finished transmission.'

He saw the fear in her eyes then, knew he'd been too harsh. More softly, he added, 'Look, weVe got this far.We can't afford to mess it up now. Let's just sit tight and play it safe - at least for now.'

The sudden roar filled their ears like cement, blocking out everything else. The noise was painful, damaging, and Lunder had to drop his gun so that he could clamp his hands over his ears. He saw Julya doing the

same. The noise abated, but its painful echo lingered in their ears like a jackhammer, reverberating, thunderous.

Lunder shouted something to Julya, but he couldn't even hear himself. Julya was staring at him, wide-eyed and afraid. They both knew what it was, were already looking upward at the lowering black shape in the sky: the patrol vessel was directly overhead, flying without engine mufflers. The ship had not been built with any such refinements, the end result being a craft that could burst eardrums from a kilometre away.

The Craab touched down several hundred metres away, the landing ramp already unfolding as the afterburners ignited. The pilot was operating with reckless bravado, as certain as any of his crew that he was going to die on this miserable rock.

Moslei stepped down on to the luminous sand and cursed. Every day this rotten tooth of a planet caused him more pain. He had long ago passed the stage where the glowing ground and pitch-black sky made him feel nauseous, but there was always a lingering feeling of unease - something alien, something wrong, with this world.

Concentrate on the job at hand, he told himself. The environment is immaterial. He knew Captain Zemler blamed him for the escape of the Mendans. Moslei was used to dealing with many more men than he presently had available on Janus Prime, and a slight miscalculation in the guard-duty roster had given the Mendans the chance they needed. The Mendans were as cunning as rats - had to be - and this particular lot had displayed sound tactical sense by making for the ruins. Without a doubt the ruins made a search-and-destroy mission like this very difficult. The ancient broken-down buildings and crumbling walls proved effective barriers to the spidroids' sensors, for one thing. There were also the strange energy fields generated by the planet itself to contend with. They were invisible and harmless, but wreaked havoc with the cyborgs' sensors. The spidroids were useful, amazingly sophisticated really, but in the end merely tools, and as such they had their limitations. Moslei had no doubt that in the end it would be a man who found the Mendans and a man who slew them.

***

Fighting a wave of nausea, Lunder picked up his gun and got to his feet. He helped Julya up.

'Come on, we've got to move now,' he said, and then realised he was bawling to overcome his own deafness. "That was a landing approach. They're here in force.'

'Vigo must be blown.'

'We can't leave without him. It would be like signing his death warrant.'

'We can't afford to wait any longer ourselves.' Julya stopped when she saw the blood trickling from Lunder's right ear. She unslung a medipac from her belt kit and selected a painkiller, shooting it into his arm in one motion. "The longer we stay here,' she continued, 'the less chance there is of us getting back home alive.'

Lunder wiped the blood from the side of his face. 'We're not leaving Vigo,' he said firmly.

***

'Platoon!' Moslei snarled into his helmet microphone.'This is your sergeant speaking. Report!'

The receiver crackled in his battle helmet and he heard the voice of one of his men: 'Sarge! Varko here. We have three spidroids patrolling Sector Seven, but as yet no fix on the Mendan fugitives.'

Varko was an excellent trooper, but Moslei made sure that his own reply in no way betrayed that fact: there was no chance of any progression through the ranks on Janus Prime.'They mustn't escape,Varko. Increase the search parameter!'

'Already done, Sarge, but the planet's energy field is disrupting the spidroid sensors and the Mendans are maintaining radio silence. It's impossible to triangulate their position.'

'Of course, lad. They may be Mendans, but one of them is a professional, remember.' Behind the visor of his helmet, a smile parted Moslei's sticky lips. "They won't elude us for much longer. They're hiding in the ruins, waiting for their chance to run. They won't get far. Maintain contact.'

Moslei turned and indicated to the troopers still with him which way he wanted them to go. 'Report directly to me at the first sign of the

Mendans,' he said. He wanted to be in at the kill. His comlink buzzed and Varko's voice said, 'Sarge! We have contact. Streenus has found 'em.'

***

They both heard the scrape of a combat boot against concrete. Julya was facing the right way so she saw him first, the pale grey armour glinting in the faint light of the sand.

She pulled her rifle up to her shoulder, aimed, squeezed the trigger. The beam flashed across the intervening six metres or so in a fraction of a second and caught the trooper on the shoulder, spinning him round. He staggered but remained upright, the thick armour impervious to low-level blaster fire.

The only weapon they had that was fully effective was the ripgun. Lunder aimed it, pulled the trigger, felt the satisfying recoil and watched the hole appear in the armour. Half a second later the explosive shell blew and turned the trooper's innards into mincemeat. He thrashed around in the dust for several moments and then lay still.

Lunder sank to one knee and activated the tiny speaker in his helmet. A faint hiss in his left ear was the only reward. Pointlessly he tapped the earpiece, knowing that the technology was unlikely to be malfunctioning due to anything as prosaic as a faulty connection.

'Nothing,' he said, a worry finally entering his voice.'Not a thing. Vigo should be signalling.'

'Maybe he's pinned down or something,' suggested Julya.

Lunder was shaking his head.'No, he should be on the comnet by now.'

'Try him,' she said.'Why not?'

Lunder activated the pin mike hanging in front of his mouth. 'Vigo. Vigo! Come on, you stupid bastard, say something.'

***

'Sarge! Trooper Streenus is down!'

Varko's voice sounded in Moslei's helmet. A stab of annoyance passed through the sergeant.

'What is their position?' he barked through the comlink.

A pause. 'Sector Seven Alpha,' replied Varko.

'Are there any other men in the area?'

'Yes, Sarge - you are. Spidroid two eight five niner has identified two humans approximately three hundred metres to your left.'

Moslei was already moving, striding through the ruins with his laser rifle ready. He activated the comlink again. 'Varko! Instruct the spidroid to maintain infrared surveillance, but not, I repeat not, to engage the enemy.'

***

The spidroid rose above them like a giant arachnid, chittering and whistling in triumph. Its scanners detected the heat signatures of two human life forms, armed with a combination of charged-partide-beani and mechanical projectile weapons. Multiple eyes focused separately on where they cowered behind a low wall. One of the life forms was aiming the projectile weapon. Automatic defence subroutines cut into its main run program and a thick jet of digestive acid spurted from between the spidroid's fangs.

The spidroid would have cut the male in half with surgical precision but for the incoming program which at the last moment prevented it from administering lethal force. Instead it recalibrated for a maiming shot, but the male was moving too fast and the acid caused only superficial damage. The male rolled and came up firing. The round exploded against the cyborg's sensor array but had little effect.

***

'Move it!'cried Lunder as the spidroid was momentarily confused. He pushed Julya bodily away from him. 'Split up! I'll meet you at the Link!'

'Your leg -'

'Go!'

There was no time for argument. The spidroid was rising on its eight long legs, humming angrily, manoeuvring for a better shot. A hundred conflicting thoughts rushed through Julya's head in a second, but her body turned and ran.

Lunder listened to the sound of her boots thudding across the dust and managed a grim smile of satisfaction. Then he turned to look at the spidroid.

It was bleeping and clicking, antennae flicking to and fro, receiving and assimilating some kind of transmission. It was taking just long enough for Lunder to recognise that he actually had a chance.

He dived, awkwardly because of the burning pain in his leg, and scrambled over a crumbling wall. He smelled the acrid stench of the creature's digestive juices spraying the air behind him, and desperately crawled away into a tunnel formed by collapsed masonry. He felt the skin scraping off his elbows as he squirmed through the narrow passage as fast as he could. He could feel the blood pounding in his head, sense the acid still burning his thigh.

Move, you stupid fool, move!

The tunnel narrowed, and Lunder nearly panicked at the thought that he might be trapped. Then he emerged from the other end, suddenly falling down a bank of shale to land in a crevice between two toppled pillars. He lay there panting for a few seconds. There was no sound of pursuit.

He looked at his chronometer again. Time was running out.

***

'Sergeant Moslei! We have a bearing on one of the Mendans,' said Varko. He was examining the display on a portable tracking device. 'Advanced primate spoor heading towards Sector Three. The stress-pheromone profile indicates female.'

Why couldn't he just say 'It's a woman'? Sometimes Varko could be too keen on the jargon. But then, he had been trained to fight aliens, not humans.'Just make sure you don't lose the trail,' he said through his helmet's pin mike.

Varko studied the scanner, oblivious to his superior's disapproving tone. "The Mendan is heading deeper into the ruins, Sarge, Typical panic flight.'

'Then we have her.' He ordered the nearest spidroid into action. 'I want this wrapped up quickly,Varko. Concentrate the spidroids' search parameters on the female. If she attempts any form of resistance, eliminate her.'

***

Julya ran until her whole world had shrunk to nothing but the rhythmic thud of her boots hitting the dirt and the burning ache in her chest. She was too scared to stop. She was too scared to cry in case the tears affected her vision. Any second she expected to see the armoured shape of a trooper stepping out in front of her and raising his laser rifle. She could imagine seeing herself skidding to a halt in the reflection of his helmet visor as the weapon was aimed. She could imagine the super-hot energy burning through her body. But it was the oblivion that followed that really frightened her, goaded her body into running faster and longer than she thought she could, deeper and deeper into the ruins.

Eventually she slowed down and tried to get her bearings. The crumbling stone walls of the old settlement rose around her in apparently random order. They made no sense to her human eyes, and with rising panic she realised she was utterly lost.

Then she heard the spidroid.

The sharp chittering of its electronic brain galvanised her into action. She darted through a gap in the nearest wall and found herself in a narrow alleyway. To her right the passage ended in a jumble of collapsed brickwork. To her left it disappeared into the gloom. Instinctively she ran towards the darkness, and then instantly regretted the decision. The spidroid could see perfectly well in low light using infrared. It could scan for body heat, or particular life-sign readings, or even her smell. Nowhere would be safe here.

And now it was coming through the gap in the wall behind her. She could hear the clack of its multiple legs, could see the groundlight reflecting off its hairy torso... She could sense it probing for her in the darkness.

Julya started forward, her legs shaking, heart pounding, making for the deeper shadows at the end of the alley. She had no other choice. Then, ahead of her, she saw a light flashing in the air - a small white beacon about three metres off the ground. A strange noise accompanied the light, a distant mechanical wheezing which seemed to grow louder and louder.

Then, with a rush of displaced air, a tall blue box appeared in front of her. The noise faded and the lamp on its roof stopped flashing. Julya stood in the small cloud of glowing dust particles thrown up by the box's arrival and stared at it in disbelief, her escape route blocked.

Behind her, the spidroid whirred and clicked in anticipation: its prey was completely trapped.

Chapter Two
Fire in the Sky

Ten minutes earlier, Samantha Jones had been listening to the Doctor's ancient recording of Enrico Caruso in Verdi's Aida . She had been trying to familiarise herself with the songs prior to their arrival on Earth in 1871, just in time for the opera's inaugural performance at the Cairo Opera House. The Doctor had promised her a grand spectacle - with a glittering audience including the Khedive of Egypt and his entire harem occupying no fewer than three boxes - after politely correcting her pronunciation:

'Eye-ee -dah,' he had said, smiling,'not Ada.'

Now the TARDIS was hurtling through the space-time vortex while its owner sipped a cup of tea and made tiny adjustments to its antiquated controls. Sam remained unimpressed. The last opera she had seen with the Doctor had been performed on the planet Thurakzima 7 by silicon-based life forms (a rock opera, she'd concluded) and so a return visit to her homeworld... well, she felt almost uncomfortable to be going back to Earth. They hadn't been back in some time, and, as usual, she'd started worrying about what her parents might say.'I couldn't call, Mum, I was in the nineteenth century.' She'd have to sort it all out. One day.

As the TARDIS was, relatively speaking, still on the outer fringes of Earth's galaxy and some four centuries adrift, Sam considered that she had plenty of time to change out of her tracksuit leggings and into a suitable frock. Now, from her position in the library armchair, legs tucked beneath her, Sam watched her friend as he tinkered. She liked to think that he had the brain of a genius and the face of a poet, but this rather romantic perception was occasionally spoiled when she considered that he also had the hair of a Rolling Stone and the clothes of a Victorian lounge lizard. He was, of course, none of these things: the Doctor was a Time Lord - and at the moment a somewhat distracted one: he was currently humming 'Smoke on the Water' by Deep Purple in direct competition with Caruso's 'O terra, addio' booming from the gramophone's trumpet speaker. As she watched, his long face creased into a worried frown.

'Trouble?' Sam asked, uncurling from the armchair.

Alerted by the squeak of training-shoe rubber on the polished wooden floor of the control platform, the Doctor glanced up. "These readings

aren't right at all,' he told her, waving a hand over the bewildering array of flashing lights and dials which made up the hexagonal console.

'What's up?'

'Either the TARDIS sensors are on the blink again or...'

'Or what?'

The Doctor disappeared suddenly beneath the console, opening a hatch so that he could rummage around inside the worryingly archaic electronics Sam had once had the misfortune of seeing. Somehow she still wasn't comfortable with a machine of such advanced design as the TARDIS being stuffed with a combination of wires, valves and printed circuits. Only the Doctor could be happy with a space-time vessel that looked like a police box on the outside and a Gothic stately home on the inside.

There was a sudden flash of sparks from one of the console panels which made Sam yelp. The Doctor jumped up and wafted a puff of smoke away with his hand. 'Sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry. Won't happen again.' He studied the instruments with a frown. 'Now that is definitely not as it should be.'

'Doctor,' she said, holding up her cup in a threatening manner, 'you know I'm not afraid to use this cup of tea if you don't tell me what's up.'

'It's the hyperspatial-mass sensors,' the Doctor muttered, 'picking up something they shouldn't.'

'So, once again: trouble?'

He looked up at her.'What do you think?'

A thrill of anticipation ran through Sam.'Where? When?'

"That's what I'm trying to find out. If I can just lock on to the coordinates...' The Doctor began stabbing buttons and pulling levers with great energy. He activated the overhead viewing dome, and the entire ceiling was instantly replaced by a huge red sun. The surface burned and fumed like a cauldron of molten lava, gouts of flame spewing into the vacuum around it.

'Wow,' said Sam.

'Fire in the sky...' sang the Doctor quietly.

The TARDIS was bathed in a scarlet glow, which reminded Sam rather unnervingly of a submarine's emergency lighting. 'What is it?'

'Red giant,' the Doctor said. 'An old star about to burn itself out.'

'That's the problem?'

'Shouldn't be.' The Doctor shut down the observatory and the TARDIS lighting returned to its normal subdued state. The destination monitor hanging on a large Z-spring overhead flickered and filled up with digital information. The Doctor spared it no more than a cursory glance before operating the controls that Sam knew governed the TARDIS landing procedure.

'Caruso will have to wait,' he said, pulling the handbrake and grinning as the desperate wheeze of materialisation began to echo around the huge chamber.

Suddenly everything bucked, and carried on bucking, as if the TARDIS was being dragged down a long flight of stairs. Sam gripped the shuddering console and gaped at the Doctor, who was operating the controls in a markedly alarmed fashion.

'What the -'

'Synchronic feedback!' yelled the Doctor.

Sam watched the Doctor's cup of tea begin to slide towards the edge of the console. She reached out one hand and held the cup and saucer still. 'Syncopated what?' she called back. She could hear things falling all over the place: candelabras, statuettes, clocks. Then the TARDIS gave a final convulsive lurch, something big crashed to the floor, and then everything was still. Sam automatically checked the time rotor at the centre of the console, sighing with relief when she saw that the glowing filaments inside the glass column were stationary. They had landed.

'Whew -'she said.

The Doctor casually flicked some switches as if nothing had happened. 'I

think we were caught in a gravitic multiloop,' he muttered. 'Probably a side effect of that anomalous hyperspatial-mass reading I told you about. Unlucky.' Sam checked the overhead monitor instead. It read:

Destination: JANUS PRIME
Dateline: 14.09.2211
HUMANIAN ERA

She reached up and twisted one of the Bakelite control knobs on the base of the old TV set. The picture flickered and turned into a black-and-white view from where the TARDIS had landed. Sam immediately saw an image of a human figure, a woman, running towards the scanner, pursued by some kind of giant insect.

'Problem!' yelled Sam. 'Of a bug-eyed-monster variety!' She turned to see the Doctor already halfway to the exit doors, and sprinted after him.

***

Only later was Julya able to make sense of the ensuing madness. Only later was she able to recall the events that were crammed into the next few seconds with anything like clarity.

No sooner had she realised that it was impossible for a box to appear out of thin air like that than one of its narrow doors snapped open and two people burst out.

The first - Julya caught a glimpse of short blonde hair -knocked her flat with a cry of,'Hit the deck!'Julya realised what was happening only when the breath was punched from her lungs by the impact. She lay on her back in the dust, the blonde woman on top of her, looking up at the second figure to dash out of the box.

He was tall, with longish hair. Old-fashioned clothes. He jumped straight over Julya and her blonde attacker to stand directly in front of the spidroid. The spidroid!

The creature rose above him, antennae twitching, and Julya could tell that it was poised to strike. So why didn't it?

'Sam.' The man spoke swiftly and confidently. 'Number eleven. Quick as you can!'

A second later Julya realised 'number eleven' was referring to some previously worked-out operation. The woman - Sam -began to manoeuvre them past the blue box. Immediately the spidroid reacted, a spray of acid catching the front of the box with hissing fury. Spurred on by fear, Julya dived behind the box, colliding with Sam and bringing them both down in a tangle of arms and legs.

'All right,' gasped Sam.'now we're even. We can fight later if you like. Right now, we leg it.' 'What?' 'Run!' Sam pulled her up and led her away from the box, into the ruins. She took a number of seemingly random turns until they couldn't hear the spidroid any longer. Eventually the young woman vaulted a low wall and sat down on the other side. Julya followed her.

'Who are you?' she panted. Her chest felt full of fear and relief at the same time.

'Intergalactic Rescue,' said Sam brightly.

Julya was prepared to believe anything now. 'Really?'

'Nope. Actually, we're strictly amateurs. At least I am. I think the Doctor's semiprofessional.'

'The Doctor?'Julya cocked a thumb back in the direction they had come.

"That's right, yeah.'

Julya shook her head. Her mind flashed up an unsettling picture of the spidroid spraying acid. 'I'm sorry, but he's a dead man.'

***

The Doctor regarded the bubbling acid with interest as it dribbled down the front of the TARDIS. By the look and the smell of it, acid of that concentration could burn through him like a laser.

He looked up at the huge spiderlike thing and smiled. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'I'm not going to hurt you.'

The thing seemed in a state of indecision that was not lost on the Doctor. He had seen enough computers stumped by conflicting data or even simple logic puzzles to recognise that, whatever the cause, he at

least had a few seconds' grace. Cautiously he took a step nearer.

The creature regarded him more closely. Its scanners and sensors were presumably transmitting confused data to what was undoubtedly some sort of positronic brain implant. This humanoid would be unlike any others it had scanned. Lower ambient body temperature. Twin cardiovascular system. Completely different pheromone signature. It was clearly programmed to recognise humans and this was...

'You don't see many arachnid life forms as big as you,' he said, speaking softly.'Certainly not ones that have been cybernetically enhanced...'

He looked directly into the cluster of eyes. As far as he could tell, only three of them were original; the other five had been replaced by various scanning or mechanical optic systems, all of them currently focused on him.

The Doctor stepped closer still. How much of this creature was artificial? How much of its responses, its actions, were governed by computer programming or natural instinct? If the program had crashed, albeit temporarily, maybe he could appeal to its animal side.

Of course, he could always just run - but where was the fun in that?

***

Moslei was desperately impatient. 'What is the delay?' he demanded, rounding irritably on Varko.

His subordinate quivered visibly inside his spacesuit. 'I can't understand the spidroid's readings, Sarge!'

'Give me the control!' Moslei examined the device with growing impatience. 'These readings make no sense, Varko. The woman appears to have escaped. The current sweep shows gibberish.'

'Perhaps the spidroid has malfunctioned.'

'We'll investigate for ourselves. Rally the men!'

***

The Doctor felt in the pockets of his frock coat for something useful. He

dared not produce the sonic screwdriver in case any automatic weapon-recognition programs cut in. The screwdriver wasn't a weapon by any means but the computer lodged inside this creature's tiny brain might decide that even a small sonic tool could represent a threat.

The yo-yo wouldn't be much use either. Or the string.

The Doctor's fingers dosed on a small square shape. 'Ah, now, you'll like this.' He held up the half-eaten chocolate bar. 'Care for a piece?'

Before he could react, the spidroid lunged forward and snatched the chocolate from the Doctor's hand with remarkable dexterity. Its mandibles transferred the whole bar, silver paper included, into a hidden mouth where it disappeared with a crunch.

'Don't be shy,' said the Doctor.'Take it all.'

The creature let out a low, unmistakably animal growl.

The Doctor grinned, reaching up to stroke the stiff hairs on its head. A few seconds later, his fingers found what they were looking for: a small metal plate set with a number of switches. Chances were this would be the control panel used to deactivate the mechanical systems, grafted on to the tough rigid flesh and connected directly to the brain.

'Now,'whispered the Doctor.'Let's see what you can do on your own.'

***

Sam guessed Julya's age at about thirty, possibly older without the ponytail. Either way, she looked pretty rough: tired, frightened, in need of a bath.

'Don't worry, we'll get you out of here.'

Julya forced a humourless smile.'Forget it. There's no way out of this mess. I told you, those spidroids are lethal. Your Doctor friend's probably dead already.'

'Hello,' said the Doctor, dropping over the wall to land in the dust between them. He grinned at Julya and held out his hand.'I'm the Doctor. Pleased to meet you.'

'Julya.' She shook the proffered hand, dazed.

'Well,Julya, I've bought us a little time, but whoever controlled that cyborg won't be far behind.'

'Spidroids are programmed to locate humans and kill them if ordered. You should be dead.'

'Yes, if Iwere human. The spidroid, as you call it, couldn't work out what to do with me. That's the trouble with computer brains: no initiative.'

'Did - did you kill it?'

The Doctor looked shocked.'Certainly not. Magnificent creature like that? They're a lot harder to make than destroy, you know.'

'So what did you do to it?' asked Sam.'How'd you get away?'

'Gave it some chocolate, tickled its fur. That kind of thing. It was a bit of a softy, actually.'

Julya covered her face with one hand.'This is madness.'

'You're right,' the Doctor agreed. 'Whoever thought of cyberneticaUy augmenting a beautiful animal like that must be insane, as well as cruel.'

'Zemler's men,' said Julya dully. "They control the spidroids.'

The Doctor looked puzzled. 'Zemler's men? There are other humans here?'

'If you can still call them that. They'll kill us if they find us.'

'Us?' echoed Sam, with mock indignation.'Innocent bystanders?'

'If they bother to ask who you are or what you're doing here, it'll be after you're dead.'

'Never mind all that,' said the Doctor, jumping to his feet. 'We should be moving.'

'Where to?' asked Julya

The Doctor helped her up. 'We can't go back to the TARDIS -that is, er... my, ah, ship - yet. The spidroid will already be drawing attention. We'll have to head deeper into these ruins, see if we can double back.'

A sudden commotion made them all look up. Across the top of a broken-down building several hundred metres away crawled a giant spider, its antennae clearly visible. Raised voices could be heard, the tones unmistakable the universe over: anger, frustration, confusion.

Typical, thought Sam. The Doctor's only been here five minutes and he's already caused chaos.

***

The spidroid was completely wild, its cybernetic control system disconnected. Moslei watched in disbelief as several of his men tried to herd it into a corner using judicious bursts from their laser rifles.

'I don't understand how this could happen,' protested Varko. 'Deliberate sabotage,' seethed Moslei, his faceplate reflecting the bright pink flashes of the laser beams.

The spidroid began to back up the sheer wall of the ruins until it perched over the soldiers, growling and spitting. A jet of acid splashed across the nearest man, causing him to retreat quickly. He started squealing as it burned through his spacesuit and ate into the flesh beneath.

'Leave him.' Moslei hissed as Varko started forward, intending to help. 'We haven't got the time to waste. It's more important that we catch the Mendans. Spread out through the ruins and check the other two spidroids are fully functional.' Then he pulled up his own rifle and shot the writhing soldier through the helmet, twice.

***

The Doctor's party met another of the creatures as they rounded a corner; it was straddling a narrow roadway lined with broken walls and dust drifts. Its huge belly was illuminated by the light from the ground.

In truth, thought Sam, the spider analogy was not all that easy to maintain. These things were just too huge to compare to the bathtub variety on Earth, yet the similarities were there nonetheless. What perturbed Sam more than anything was the fact that she thought she

had left her schoolgirl's fear of anything with eight legs behind a long time ago. Since meeting the Doctor she had met creatures from all over the universe, including a pair of pleasant Arachnons on Dreamstone Moon. They were a lot smaller than this thing, true, but they had been intelligent and entirely nonaggressive. And they had made her laugh.

But now she found herself staring at a spider the size of a Ford Transit with none of the insouciant familiarity she had expected. No, this thing made her stomach contract in sheer revulsion. It wasn't just the obscene size of it, either: there were metallic implants clearly visible through the exoskeleton, with electronic components cruelly bolted to the chitin.

'Yuck,' she said.

'Interesting,' the Doctor mused at her shoulder. 'Notice how easily it moves around the ruins? These doorways and roads were made for them.'

'Fascinating. Can we leave the David Attenborough bit till later?'

'Too late, it's seen us. Run!'

The spidroid was heading for them, scuttling smoothly along the avenue. Sam, Jurya and the Doctor stumbled back along a crumbling side road. When they halted, Julya tugged her laser pistol from its holster on her thigh, turning and waiting for the alien to come into view.

'What kind of gun is that?' asked the Doctor, also stopping.

'Not much of one, I'm afraid, but it's all I've got.'

'I mean, how does it work?'

'Charged laser beam.'

"That'll only burn it, and probably enrage it.'

Sam said, with some impatience, 'So what's the point? Ditch it and let's run!'

'Wait, wait, wait.' The Doctor took the pistol and examined it. 'We should be able to do something with this.'

Julya seemed a little worried at the implausible ease with which her gun had been confiscated.'How?' 'Doctor, hurry,' Sam said. 'It's coming.'

But the Doctor had already produced his sonic screwdriver and was hunched over the gun, lost in concentration. 'If I can just relocate the focusing coil...' 'It's coming,' cried Julya.

The Doctor dropped to one knee, aimed and pulled the trigger. Instead of the expected laser beam, however, a sudden pulse of energy leapt from the barrel and washed over the spidroid like an ocean wave. Immediately it began to spin around, legs jumping erratically, giving off a high-pitched gargling noise which set Sam's teeth on edge.

They watched, transfixed, as the creature barrelled into a wall and then sank as if its legs could no longer support its body. There it sat, quivering and silent.

'Cybernetic feedback in the neural pathways,' said the Doctor quietly, as if feeling the need to explain. As if that would make it better, perhaps. Julya could see real sadness in those soft blue eyes, and suddenly felt that this man could be a lot older and wiser than he looked.

'Ouch!' The Doctor dropped the pistol and sucked his fingers. 'Think I overloaded the thermostatic shield a bit there...'

Sam grabbed him by his arm.'Come on!"

***

Varko looked up from the remote control monitor.'Sarge! Another spidroid's down.'

Moslei bit out a curse and unslung his rifle. 'Who the hell are these people? I thought they were just another bunch of Mendans.'

'They're running rings around us.'

'No, Varko, they are not. They may be leading the spidroids a merry dance, but they won't get away from us. Where did the last spidroid go down?'

'I lost contact with it in Sector Three Alpha.'

'The other one went wild in Sector Seven.' Moslei cocked his rifle. 'They're heading for the Link. They're going to make a run for it. Let's go!'

***

"This way,' said Julya. The Doctor and Sam looked at each other and followed. The woman seemed to have stumbled into an area of the ruins that was familiar to her now. Sam was totally disorientated, and the groundlight was making her feel sick. All the shadows were wrong with everything lit from below. It made her feel giddy. She was still trying to damp down the nausea when she ran straight into the Doctor's back.

'Back the other way,' he said,'quickly! Quick, quick!'

Julya had broken off to the left. The Doctor was pushing Sam to the right and back. Before she could understand what was happening, a brilliant pink beam of energy lanced past and blew a chunk of the wall away behind them. It was swiftly followed by another.

'We're being shot at,' the Doctor told her, casually dragging her down into the luminous dirt.

'Already? This must be some kind of record, even for you.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'There was one time in San Francisco... never mind!' He ducked, bending over her, as another shot passed overhead. Sam could smell the heat in the air. She squirmed out from under him and looked back down the street. She could just see two figures wearing what looked like spacesuits aiming rifles at them. Another series of pink flashes kicked up the dust close by.

Julya looked back across the street from her position behind a broken wall. It was difficult to tell with the groundlight and the laser flashes but the Doctor and Sam seemed to be in a safe position. She was tempted to leave them there. She thought she could make the Link from here without too much difficulty. But there was something that stopped her, something she couldn't easily identify but wanted to.

'Doctor! Sam! We need to go this way!' she called out. 'You must be joking!' Sam's young voice jumped back at her. 'We'll get fried!'

The Doctor waved a hand at his companion. 'Wait, wait. Those men are

just shooting to keep us pinned down. They'd have come after us by now if they wanted to fry us.'

In the half-light Sam could see him looking back down the street, and then looking across it to where Julya was crouched. Judging distances.

'You'reso mad,' she told him.

The Doctor grinned at her. 'If we wait much longer reinforcements will arrive and then they'll have us trapped.' He turned his grey-blue eyes on her, deadly serious. 'We go together, one quick dash, on the count of diree. One. Two. Three!'

The Doctor jumped across the intervening space, a cloud of glowing dust kicked up by his shoes. Several laser bolts leapt after him, but none of them struck. The moment he flattened himself against the opposite wall, the Doctor looked back at Sam, realising she hadn't followed.

'It's usuallyafter three,' she hissed,'noton three!' The Doctor held his hands out, palms forward. 'Don't move! They'll be waiting for you now.'

Sam stared at him, caught in a frenzy of indecision. A single laser beam flashed past, its brief pink light illuminating the Doctor's face - eyes and mouth open in mute concern. Then it was swallowed up by the darkness, and Sam's vision was momentarily overloaded by the energy flash. When it had recovered she couldn't see the Doctor any more. Both he and Julya were gone.

***

Julya dragged the Doctor by the arm for nearly one hundred metres before he pulled himself free of her grip.

'Sam's not with us!' he told her.

Julya felt herself beginning to panic. They were close to the Link. They could escape. But right now they were out in the open and terribly vulnerable. She grabbed hold of the Doctor's arm again.'We can't go back. We'll be caught.'

The Doctor looked back the way they had just come, and realised he was about to sprint back for his friend when a spacesuited figure strode into view, pointing a laser rifle at them.

'All right, that's it,' the soldier's voice rasped from the speaker in his helmet. They could see their ghostly reflections in the visor. 'Don't move or I'll -'A laser bolt punctured his chest and flung him backwards. He sprawled in the dirt, a dark shape on the bright ground, his rifle forgotten. The Doctor crouched down beside his body, feeling for signs of life.

'Wondered when you'd show up,' said another voice from behind them. They turned to see a tall, muscular young man in combat fatigues holding a smoking rifle.

'Lunder!' exclaimed Julya, almost sobbing the name with relief.

'Did you have to shoot to kill?' asked the Doctor, coldly.

'Who's this?'

'The Doctor,' said Julya. 'He saved me.'

The Doctor stepped forward. 'It's something I specialise in,' he announced. 'I should have cards printed.'

Lunder glared at the long-haired man.'Who sent you?'

'Time for questions later,' said the Doctor briskly, walking straight past him. 'We need to keep moving. Zemler's men are right behind us and we're sitting ducks out here in the open. I need to get back to Sam, maybe circle round. And you're not going to be able to travel very quickly with that leg wound.'

Lunder automatically glanced down at the ragged red stain on his left thigh. He began to limp after the Doctor but Julya held him back.

'He's all right; she told him.

Lunder just nodded. 'He's right: we can't stand around here talking. Let's go.'

***

Sam was still stuck where the Doctor had left her, utterly unsure what to do next. Her mouth felt as dry as the glowing sand beneath her fingers. She was starting to get used to the upside-down light now. She could

make out the shapes of the ruins around her more easily, decipher the upward shadows, work out where to go next.

She couldn't follow the Doctor with the patrol now between them, but she could double back. Find the TARDIS. She could run, and run fast. The enemy were in bulky spacesuits, weighed down by weapons and armour. It couldn't be easy aiming those laser rifles through a helmet visor, either. That's why they were such rotten shots.

She broke cover and ran like a rabbit. The first laser bolt struck her squarely behind the left shoulder and sent her tumbling forward into the sand where she lay stunned. It didn't hurt much, not at first. Then the pain came in sharp bursts like someone twisting a broken bottle into the flesh of her upper arm. A twist. Then another, then ...

It hurt too much to cry. She rolled over and, using her other arm, tried to sit up. She could cope with the pain if she sat still and breathed through her mouth in short, hot gasps. For a while at least.

A shadow rose up her as a figure in a spacesuit blocked out the light from the ground. She looked up, right into the muzzle of a laser rifle.

'Gotcha,' said the soldier.

***

The Doctor hurried to keep up with Julya and her friend. Although loath to prejudge people, the Doctor had the feeling that he knew Lunder's type only too well: an unhappy combination of muscle and guns which always meant trouble. The Doctor scowled, aware that his irritation stemmed largely from losing Sam. Hehad to get her back.

Lunder was limping badly, but, somewhat typically, thought the Doctor, refused to slow down. He was just too tough to be hindered by anything as trivial as an open wound. The Doctor shook his head sadly, knowing that the pain - and the damage -would catch up with him sooner or later.

They were now approaching an expanse of rocky terrain, littered -with a few low bushes made up of twiggy stems with sharp thorns.

"There's no sign of Vigo,' Lunder told Julya.

'I thought we were circling round?' asked the Doctor, but he was ignored.

'We can't wait any longer,' she replied. She spoke with surprising gentleness in the circumstances. Lunder simply nodded.'We have to go,' she added.

The Doctor coughed politely. 'Go where?'

'You don't know about the Link?' Lunder's eyes narrowed, and his gun was pointing at the Doctor's chest.

'We'll explain later,' said Julya.'Come on.'

'Wait, wait, wait. My friend Sam's lost in the ruins back there and -'

'If we wait any longer,' said Lunder, 'Zemler's men will find us and kill us. If we're lucky. So if you want to live, follow us.'

With that, Lunder turned on his heel, stepped forward and vanished. The air itself seemed to ripple in his wake as if a sudden breeze had stirred the reflections in a pool of clear water.

'It's the Link,' said Julya, noticing the Doctor's raised eyebrow.

'Come on, you'll be safe when we get to Menda.'

'Menda?' echoed the Doctor, but Julya had already walked to the same place where Lunder had disappeared and vanished also. 'Wait! Sam helped you, you can't just -' The air shimmered like a mirage behind her.

'Hold it!' said a harsh voice behind him.

The Doctor turned and saw a group of spacesuited men approaching from the ruins, weapons raised. A spidroid was crawling behind them. 'I don't suppose you'd spare many resources to help me find my best friend, would you?' he said sadly. The soldiers said nothing, but advanced towards him.'Sorry,' said the Doctor, walking backwards towards the Link,'but I've got to disappear.'

With a ripple of air, he did.

'Damn,' said Varko, lowering his gun. He activated his helmet mike.

'Sarge?'

'What is it,Varko?'

'They reached the Link, Sarge. They've gone.' Varko paused. 'Permission to follow them?'

'Denied.' The reply was absolute.'You wouldn't last more than a few minutes where they've gone. You'd need extra air supplies and full backup. Besides which, there's no need: weVe already caught one of them.'

***

Sam could only sit and watch as more spacesuited figures marched up, guns levelled, and surrounded her. Each one was aiming his rifle at her head, gloved finger tight on the trigger, as if she was the galaxy's most dangerous terrorist or something. Then one of the men lowered his rifle and stepped forward.

'I'm Sergeant Moslei,' he said.'I'm in charge here.'

His voice was flat and metallic through the helmet speaker but Sam had the impression of an older man, in his forties perhaps.

'I'm Sam; she said, proffering a hand.'I simply can't understand why tourism isn't a bigger industry here.'

Chapter Three
Escape to...?

'Extraordinary!' said the Doctor.

The second he had stepped into the Link on Janus Prime the Doctor had felt as if he were an elastic band stretched to breaking point and then released. The return to normal size and shape the other end of the device was both traumatic and a blessed relief. But while Jutya and Lunder emerged at the other end weakened and distressed, the Doctor bounced into view with a wide grin.

'Splendid!' he said.'Can we do it again?'

Julya looked up at him from where she was kneeling on a white-tiled floor, and her glare made him realise just how affected she'd been by the transition.

'I'm sorry,' he said, bending over her.'Are you all right?'

She nodded.'Don't worry. It's always a bit like this. Welcome to Menda.'

Menda. Another planet. He was a world away from Sam, just as on Hirath's moon, just as when he lost her for so long... He had to get her back. She was older now, could take care of herself he knew, but even so...

The Doctor straightened up and looked around them. The exit to the Link was visible as a slight distortion in the air behind him. The room was Spartan, white, with a low ceiling studded with fluorescent lights which gave the place a cool, sterile air. The lights led to a wide bay fronted by a thick window, on the far side of which were a number of people all looking back at him with anxious faces. Then the Doctor realised they weren't actually looking at him, but rather the bulky figure of Lunder lying prone on the floor at his feet.

The Doctor knelt down and gently rolled the commando over. The movement resulted in a low groan and a curse. 'Now that,' Lunder said quietly, 'hurt.'

'This is an acid burn,' commented the Doctor as he examined the wound on the man's leg. 'Spidroid acid, I presume?'

Lunder tried to push the Doctor's hand away. 'It's OK. Leave it.'

'No. The material of your combat fatigues has trapped some of the acid against your skin. That's why it's still hurting so much.' Very gently the Doctor peeled back part of the rough material.

Lunder spoke through gritted teeth: 'You a doctor?'

'I told you, I'mthe Doctor.'

A klaxon sounded and a metallic voice boomed, 'Decontamination procedure complete. Link chamber may now be accessed .'

Suddenly the room was full of people, including a team of paramedics who immediately surrounded Lunder and transferred him to a stretcher. The Doctor braced himself for a violent assault, but found himself more or less ignored. A couple of them fussed around Julya, but as she was still on her feet and apparently unharmed they soon lost interest. She moved over to where the Doctor stood to one side wiping Lunder's blood off his fingers with a handkerchief.

'He'll be OK,' she told him. 'Don't worry.'

'I'm not,' he replied. 'It's a nasty wound but nothing serious. He was lucky.'

Julya smiled. "That's not a word Lunder uses much. He likes to think of himself as a trained professional.'

'And is he? A trained professional?'

'Oh, he's trained all right.' Further conversation was interrupted by the arrival of what the Doctor assumed was the official welcoming party. A group of officials were led by a man with a wide grey moustache and eyes surrounded by wrinkles who stepped up and clasped Julya warmly to him. It stopped short of an actual embrace, but there was affection there.

'Julya, I'm so glad you made it back. We were getting worried.' The man looked briefly at the Doctor. 'What happened? Where's Vigo?'

'We don't know what happened to Vigo, Kleiner. We think he may have

been captured.'

Kleiner's dark eyes narrowed in concern. 'Did you find the base?'

Julya began to unbuckle her combat vest. 'We found it all right. Then they found us. We had to pull back to the ruins, but they were too well equipped. We were separated from Vigo, and they were using spidroids. If it hadn't been for this man, I'd be dead too.'

Kleiner looked again at the Doctor, who introduced himself and shook the man's hand. His grip was firm and dry. 'Then we owe you a debt, Doctor.'

'That's not all,' Julya continued. 'He single-handedly incapacitated two of the spidroids.'

Kleiner raised his eyebrows further. 'Better and better. Well, Doctor. Perhaps we should retire to the debriefing room and find out what you know, hmm?'

'That,' said the Doctor,'could take some time.'

***

The debriefing room turned out to be little more than a large cupboard, positioned at the end of a labyrinth of corridors. The Doctor sighed loudly, slumped over the round white table, playing idly with a piece of cotton he'd pulled from his coat lining. Suddenly he leapt up from his chair. 'Do you mind if I open the door? It's a little stuffy in here, isn't it?'

Kleiner looked at Julya and raised an eyebrow. She shrugged, and the Doctor took that as a yes.

'How did you get to Janus Prime, Doctor?' asked Kleiner, as the Doctor sat back down in his chair.'I thought we were pretty well cut off from the rest of the galaxy.'

The Doctor smiled his most disarming smile. 'Well, we were just in the vicinity, and -'

'We?'

'Yes, my friend and I. Her name is Sam Jones.' He glanced at Julya.'I'm

afraid she was left behind on Janus Prime.'

Kleiner's expression turned even more grave. 'Oh dear. She isn't...?'

'No no no.' The Doctor shook his head.'No, she can't be. I need to return there to see if I can find her, so if you'll excuse me -'

'I'm afraid that won't be possible,' Kleiner said. 'At least not yet. The area surrounding the link will be teeming with Zemler's men, and probably spidroids, too.'

Julya watched the Doctor's reaction. The skin around his angular jaw tightened fractionally and a harder light shone in his eyes. 'Surely that is even more reason why I should go back straight away.'

An equally determined look had entered Kleiner's eyes.'It's not a matter for discussion. I'm sorry. You may want to risk your life, but I'm not prepared to risk the lives of any of my people here. Without a guide, you wouldn't last two minutes on Janus Prime.'

'I'l take that chance.'

'No.'

'But Sam is in danger!'

Kleiner nodded. 'Yes, I'm very much afraid that she is. Great danger.'

The Doctor closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his long nose, almost as if he was trying to quell an imminent temper tantrum or make some abstruse calculation using only mental arithmetic. It was impossible to tell, and Julya found herself fascinated by him. The long, wavy, brown hair and the old-fashioned costume made him look simultaneously heroic and ludicrous.

'All right, all right,' he said finally, shoulders slumping. 'I quite understand. I'm just worried about her, that's all.'

'Of course.' Kleiner appeared genuinely sorry. 'If there's anything we can do in the meantime...?'

'I suppose a cup of tea is out of the question?'

There was a muted crackle in the air followed by a synthetic voice speaking over some kind of PA system. "Would Mr Kleiner please report to the infirmary? '

Kleiner stiffened. "That'll be Lunder.'

'Do you think he's OK?' asked Julya.

'Lunder? Of course he's OK. He's probably complaining the bed sheets are too soft for him. You see, Doctor, you're not the only one who's left someone behind on Janus Prime. Doctor?'

But the Doctor had disappeared.

***

They seemed like very nice people, but the Doctor wasn't in the mood for hospitality. He ran full pelt through the corridors, trying to put as much distance between himself and Kleiner as possible. The Doctor wanted answers, but more than that he wanted to find Sam.

He skidded to a halt as a party of Mendans marched across the corridor ahead of him. They were heading in the same direction as he was - back to the Link. He thought for a moment. The controls to the link were housed in the nonsterile chamber outside, and if memory served...

Backtracking and turning left, he found a narrow stairwell and ran down the steps three at a time, emerging on to the next level down. Fortunately, there didn't seem to be as many people around here - whereverhere was. A long whitewashed passage led away to the left, and the Doctor started off in that direction. It was colder here, as if the place was underground, and electric lamps had been attached clumsily to the ceiling.

Further along the corridor he found a set of locked doors marked MORTUARY. The Doctor shrugged and moved on. The next door was labelled ARMOURY. That was definitely no use. The next door had NO UNAUTHORISED ACCESS stencilled across it in large, unfriendly red letters. Without hesitating, the Doctor opened it and stepped through.

On the other side was a young man carrying a laser pistol. He started when he saw the Doctor, and raised the gun in alarm.

'Ah, there you are,' said the Doctor, without missing a beat. 'Kleiner told me I'd find you down here.'

'Who are you?' the boy asked, blanching visibly. He could be no more than a teenager.

'The Doctor. I'm sorry, but I've forgotten your name.' 'Pietr,' said the boy, shaking the Doctor's proffered hand awkwardly.

'That's it!' The Doctor slapped his forehead. 'Pietr! Glad I've found you.'

Pietr took a deep breath and steadied his grip on the gun, keeping the barrel aimed at the Doctor's chest. 'What do you want?' he asked suspiciously.

'I'm looking for the Link,' the Doctor said, and walked straight past him. 'This way, isn't it?'

If the boy was going to open fire it would be now, while he had a clear shot. The Doctor tensed up, but carried on walking as confidently as before.

'No,' said the boy. 'It's this way.'

***

'I want him found!' said Kleiner.'And quickly!'

'He could be anywhere!' said a young guard who had answered Kleiner's shouts for assistance.'What does he look like?'

'Are you telling me you wouldn't recognise a stranger on this base if you saw one?' roared Kleiner.

The guard glanced nervously at Julya.'We'll check the exit doors first.'

Julya shook her head.'No need. I know where he'll be.'

***

Pietr led the Doctor back up another flight of stairs and into another passageway. Thankfully, the place seemed more or less deserted.

"The link chamber is along there on the left,' said Pietr.

The Doctor smiled at him. 'Thank you. You've been most helpful!'

Pietr turned and went back down to resume his duties on the level below. The Doctor waited until he was out of sight before sprinting down the corridor towards the Link control chamber. He knew it wouldn't be long before Kleiner organised a full-scale search of the entire complex.

Cautiously nudging open the heavy door, the Doctor peered around before stepping warily into the room. He could discern the shimmering in the air ahead in the sterile area, and took in the controls around him.

As a rule, matter transmitters were pretty crude affairs in the early twenty-third century; they required large amounts of energy, a lot of computer power and complex supervisory systems, none of which seemed to be in evidence here. The Link could be native to this planet, of course, the machinery hidden - but that didn't explain the space-time deformity. The Doctor could sense it more strongly this close, a distant tugging at those parts of his senses that were given over to the fourth dimension. The humans here wouldn't be able to sense it, but he could.

'Step away from the Link, Doctor,' said Kleiner, from behind him.

The Doctor turned to see him and Julya framed in the doorway. Kleiner held a laser pistol, but its barrel was pointing at the floor.

'Ah,' said the Doctor, taking in the armed men behind Julya.

'Good attempt,' said Julya, smiling.

'But pointless,' concluded Kleiner, heavily. 'And I wouldn't even think about trying to use the Link right now. You'd probably kill yourself. It's phased down.'

'I beg your pardon?' inquired the Doctor, sweetly.

'More or less immediately after use, the transmat beam narrows down to a standby wavelength. It won't be taking anything to Janus Prime for another few hours.'

The Doctor considered this carefully. Kleiner could be bluffing, although what he described was in accordance with variable-phase transmat

technology for this time period. It just didn't seemright for this setup. In fact, Kleiner's tone seemed to suggest that they had no control over it anyway.

'All right,' he said, with a sad smile.'You win.'

'Good,' said Kleiner.

The Doctor shoved his hands in his pockets.'I'm just so worried about my friend, Sam...'

'I appreciate that, but it's as I say - you'll just have to be patient.'

'Doctors make terrible patients,' retorted the Doctor.

Julya smiled at him. 'I promise you, we will help you if we can.' She looked at Kleiner.'Won't we?'

Kleiner looked a little discomfited but nodded slowly. The Doctor allowed himself to be led from the Link chamber once again. In the corridor outside, Kleiner made a point of posting two armed guards on the doors.

'Back to the debriefing room?' inquired the Doctor.'It's this way, I think.'

Kleiner shook his head. 'You're at liberty to move around here, Doctor. Julya has vouched for you. And now I trust you realise the Link is off limits -' the Doctor attempted to look suitably shamefaced at his emphasis on the words - 'I have more pressing matters I must attend to with Julya.'

'Wait,' the Doctor said, taking a deep breath. 'Wait, wait, wait. There are some important questions I've forgotten to ask.'

'Such as?'

'Where am I? What are you people doing here? In short: what, exactly, is going on?'

***

Sergeant Moslei was glad the chase was over now. He was tired, more tired than he thought he would be. The net result was: two men killed, two spidroids out of order, and two prisoners taken. And one of those

was a girl - well, a young woman.

She was extraordinary, thought Moslei.You could see at a glance that she wasn't a soldier, despite the short crop of her blonde hair. She wore a loose khaki jacket over a sleeveless top tucked into black trousers with an elasticated waistband. The legs were also elasticated at the ankles, which were protected by sturdy-looking footwear with thick treads and flashes on the side suggesting a sporting application. It was his training that had made Moslei examine her kit in such detail; he was disappointed by the lack of military gear but fascinated by its incongruity. What were the Mendans thinking of, sending a lass like this through the Link? To Janus Prime of all places?

Still, all information could be ascertained back at base. The prisoner was loaded on board the Craab, along with the remainder of the squad. They were in a low mood. Moslei was careful to make sure it was Varko who saw the girl to her cell. He could trust Varko.

***

Sam found herself allowing the spacemen to escort her back to their ship without complaint - she thought she might be sick if she opened her mouth. The pain from her shoulder was unbelievable. She was taken on board, where it was dark and smelled of iron and BO. Although it was uncomfortably hot, she was starting to shiver. A reaction to the injury, she supposed, and was surprised at how clinical she sounded.

The spaceman guarding her seemed to notice. He turned her around and examined the burnt hole in her jacket, not urgently.

'Who brought her down?' he asked the other troopers nearby.

Sam felt like a deer.

'Kejke popped her at two hundred metres,' said one of the men, a definite note of admiration in his voice.

'Good shot; said her guard, who had the word VARKO stencilled on the front of his helmet, just below the reflective visor. She guessed this was his name, because one of the others who had the word KEJKE on his helmet laughed and said, 'I was aiming at her head!'

This produced a chorus of laughter from his mates.

'OK, that's enough,' said Varko.'Let's take a look at this.' He bent down and peered at the wound. Sam wondered how much he could see through the visor.

'Just remember you're looking at my shoulder,' she managed to say sourly.

'You're all right. Flesh wound.' Varko touched it with a gloved finger and Sam jumped. 'Sorry. It's cauterised, though. You'll be OK.'

'Yeah, baby,' called out Kejke.'We'll be able to use you for target practice again, come the morning.'

'You asshole, Kejke,' said another man, "There ain't no mornings on Janus Prime.'

Sam summoned up enough strength to show Kejke her middle finger, but the effort made her feel faint. She heard Varko's voice speaking from a long way away:

'Come on, girl, let's put you away. Don't worry about Kejke, he's a turd. It's Captain Zemler you don't want to mess with.'

They halted by a thick bulkhead door. 'Who's he?' asked Sam.

'Bad man on a bad planet.'

Sam looked up into the red visor. Even she was surprised by how pale her reflection looked.'Tell me.Varko: do all soldiers have to learn to speak like that?'

'Like what?'

'like gorillas would speak if they were stupid.' Sam was pleased with this, until she passed out.

***

The Doctor was made to wait for his explanations. Kleiner, who seemed to be in authority, suddenly had other matters and duties requiring his urgent attention, while Julya needed to change out of her combat gear and attend a formal debriefing. The Doctor was promised attention and

neatly sidelined, but he didn't mind this too much as it gave him the opportunity to explore.

The Link appeared to be based in some sort of quasi-military facility. It was underground as far as the Doctor could tell. There was something about the place which reminded him of an archaeological dig, too. Some of the chambers and passageways looked ancient, while most of the equipment he saw dotted around was brand-new. He recognised a lot of it, of course: portable energy banks, mobile computers, the odd robot. He might have begun to relax, if it hadn't been for the nagging worry about Sam, and the presence of the armed guards who always made him feel uneasy. The guards were mostly centred around the Link chamber itself, but then so were many of the civilians whom the Doctor instinctively recognised as scientists.

The guards would not allow him past the observation bay to the Link itself, although he was allowed to wander around the rooms annexed to the chamber. Among the various equipment rooms and ancillary chambers was an emergency medical centre, fitted out with four basic diagnostic couches linked to computers. A robot nurse was methodically bandaging the leg of a large muscular man propped up by pillows. He was smoking a large cigar.

'Feeling better?' asked the Doctor. Lunder opened his eyes but said nothing. 'I haven't got any grapes, I'm afraid,' the Doctor continued. He rummaged in a pocket and pulled out a crumpled paper bag.'Jelly baby, perhaps?'

Lunder took a long pull on his cigar. 'Not sure I should be talking to you. I don't really know who you are.'

'I told you -'

'You're the Doctor, right. But that's all I know.'

The Doctor popped a jelly baby into his own mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "This is a security thing, isn't it? You think I might be a spy.'

Lunder raised an eyebrow and carried on smoking. The robot nurse finished dressing the wound, burbled something electronic at the diagnostic computer and then trundled out. The Doctor stepped aside to let it pass.

'I don't suppose there's much point in asking you any questions, then?' he said, punching up Lunder's case notes on the console at the foot of his bed. 'Such as why the sand glows on Janus Prime? Or the reason why Zemler's men all wore spacesuits? Just in case I'm a spy, rather than simply inquisitive?'

'Doctor, I'm supposed to be convalescing here. Not being interrogated.'

'Oh, quite. You'd feel a lot better if you stopped smoking, by the way. So don't worry about the questions - I'll ask Julya instead. I'm sure she'll be more helpful.'

The Doctor smiled, left the bag of jelly babies on the table next to the bed and left. After the door had dosed behind him, Lunder sat gazing silently at the glowing tip of his cigar for a full minute. Then he activated the vidcom by his bed and entered his access code. Ten seconds later Kleiner's face appeared on the screen.

'Lunder! You'll do anything to dodge the debrief, won't you?' Kleiner grinned at him, but the grin faded when he saw the grim light in Lunder's eyes. Immediately he looked concerned. 'How's your leg?'

'Never mind about that. Did Julya fill you in on what happened?'

The image of Kleiner gave a sombre nod.'By the sound of it you were lucky to get out alive.'

"Vigo didn't.'

There was a brief silence by way of initial response. 'You can't be sure he's dead.'

'If Zemler doesn't kill him, then the radiation will.'

Slowly, Kleiner said, 'You're not thinking of going back for him, are you? It's impossible.'

'You can't be certain of that.'

'I'm as certain as I have to be.' Kleiner's face filled the vidcom screen. 'You've been exposed to the radiation on Janus Prime for too long now. If you go back too soon, you risk a fatal dose.'

'Isn't that exactly what Vigo is doing right now?'

Kleiner rubbed a hand down his mouth and chin. 'He went in a day ahead of you, remember? Calculated risk.'

Lunder gave a snort. 'He didn't calculate on not coming back with us.'

'All the same... you know how long reimmunisation takes. Let your body recover. Then we'll think about it.'

'You mean you'll put it to the council.'

'Yes.'

'And they'll refuse.'

Kleiner sighed. He could see the determination in the commando's expression.'Forget about going back, Lunder. It's out of the question. I've already had this conversation with that Doctor fellow you brought back.'

Lunder stirred. 'Julya brought him back. What d'you make of him?'

'Doesn't seem a threat. He was worried about a friend he says he left on Janus Prime.' Kleiner sat back in his chair. 'I wonder where he came from.'

'That's just what I was wondering.'

'Julya says he arrived in some sort of capsule, an escape pod maybe. I suppose it'spossible he dropped from an interstellar flypast, but we're quite a way off the beaten track here.'

Tell me about it, thought Lunder.

'Wasted a couple of spidroids single-handed, apparently,' added Kleiner.

'I doubt it,' retorted Lunder. 'He wasn't even armed.'

'Well, I've asked Julya to keep an eye on him.'

'So why isn't she? I've just had him in here.'

Kleiner continued, ignoring the interruption. 'She's taking him back to

Newtown with her tonight so that we can drag him in front of the council debrief and ask him a few searching questions. Happy?'

'Ecstatic.' Lunder bid Kleiner a terse farewell and powered down. Then he shoved the vidcom back so hard it bounced off the wall.

***

On the far side of the Link chamber, the Doctor had found the source of all the scientific attention. In a large, circular room was a tall metallic column about two metres in diameter and covered with strange geometric patterns. Most of it was obscured by the presence of a group of men in white coveralls examining its surface. Scientists. There was an earnest discussion under way concerning the material from which the column was made. One of the scientists seemed to consider it obviously a metal, probably an alloy. Another was convinced it was actually some form of plastic. The Doctor, who had sidled up to the two men so that he might eavesdrop more easily, leaned forward and ran his fingers over the surface of the pillar. It was a burnished silver-blue, hard as rock but warm to the touch. There was not a trace of grime or dust on it. The Doctor withdrew his hand and sniffed the tips of his fingers.

'Superdense metal polymer,' he said. The two scientists stared at him. They had lapsed into silence the moment he had touched the column.'So you were both right,' the Doctor said, smiling.'Or both wrong, depending on your point of view.'

'I thought I'd find you here,' said a voice from behind him.

The Doctor turned.'Julya! How was the debriefing?'

'Fine.' She had washed and changed into a black jumpsuit, simple but not severe. There were no markings or insignia on it. 'Having fun?'

The Doctor pointed a long finger at the strange column. "This controls the Link, doesn't it?'

'That's a moot point around here.'Julya linked her arm through the Doctor's and gently led him away. He made no effort to resist her. 'For one thing none of our people can agree on anything about it. And for another, while we understand the mechanics of matter transmission all right, we can't make out these controls. Whoever invented them were way beyond us, technologically speaking.'

The Doctor frowned. 'I'm sorry. Are you saying that you didn't build the Link?'

'No. We found it. Come with me, and I'll explain everything.'

'You don't know how long I've waited for someone to say that to me,' said the Doctor.

***

'Come on, girl. Wake up.'

Sam opened her eyes but saw nothing. For a second she panicked, thinking she had gone blind, but then she realised it was just dark and there wasn't much to see.

A man's face was peering at her.'Wakey wakey. Rise and shine."

'Where am I?'

'On your way to Zemler's base. What's your name?'

'Sam.'

'OK, Sam. Sit up and let me have a look at that shoulder of yours.' The man helped her into a sitting position, and Sam's left shoulder felt like it had burst into flames. She hissed through her teeth and shut her eyes. The pain kept coming.

'Does it hurt?'

She couldn't be bothered to think of a quip, now. She just nodded and whispered,'Yes.'

'Here, lie still.' There was a sharp chiff! sound and a cold sensation against her throat. Sam snapped open her eyes to see the man holding some kind of small plastic tube between his fingers.

'Pain killer. Should take effect pretty soon.'

Sam almost sobbed with relief when it did. Within a minute the burning in her shoulder had subsided to an aching warmth. After a while she could

almost kid herself it was comforting.

'Thanks.'

'Don't mention it.' He held up the hypo. 'I was saving it for a special occasion.'

He was about thirty-five, maybe older - it was hard to tell beneath the stubble and the grime. He was balding, too, but he had big, kind eyes surrounded by lots of laughter lines. His ears stuck out too much. In different circumstances he might have looked funny.

They were sitting in a small metal box, about two metres by two metres. There was one door and a strip of yellow light behind a cloudy plastic shield in the ceiling. The floor was a metal grille which Sam suspected had left sharp red ruts across the skin of her face where she had been lying.

'What happens now, then?' she asked.

'Don't know. I've never been caught before. And I don't know anyone else who has, either.'

'Where no one has gone before, eh?'

'What?'

'Nothing. Hey, I forgot to ask: what's your name?'

He smiled and held out his hand.'I'm Vigo,' he said.

'Hi.' Sam shook the hand, but when she came to let go she was surprised to find it sticky. Trying not to pull a face, she wiped her palm down her coat.

'It's all right,' he told her. 'It's not contagious. It's just the radiation sickness. I'm dying, you see.'

Chapter Four
Janus Prime

The stellar cartographers of Earth had designated the red giant Janus GM2797, and its first planet was therefore Janus Prime. The star charts were actually copied from those left by the Daleks after their abortive occupation of Earth in the 2160s, and the spacecraft used to travel to the stars, both charted and uncharted, were designed using captured alien technology.

So humankind took its first steps out of the solar system by combining its native ingenuity and determination to ride on the backs of the alien races who had already discovered interstellar travel. Once again human beings achieved a level of technology beyond their years.

This, Gustav Zemler knew, was how other intelligent life forms in this part of the galaxy viewed Earth and its inhabitants. He had read the intelligence reports while serving a brief tour of duty in the security service. The Arcrurans and the Mentors in particular were willing but suspicious traders - they watched the humans carefully during negotiations as an adult might watch a child who was holding a sharp knife. One never knew whether the child would cause injury to himself or others, but cause injury he would.

Gustav Zemler had never seen it like this. He understood the intellectual reasoning behind such opinion, but he knew from experience what the outcome would be. Another boy had tried to take little Gustav's knife from him and had lost two fingers for his trouble. An immediate and awe-struck circle of boys had formed around Gustav and from that moment on he had known the power of violence.

The boys had split into two factions - those who avoided him, and those who stuck with him at all costs. He treated neither any differently, and used his newfound power to keep both factions in their place.

It had been easy on Earth for young Gustav. The Daleks had been defeated, but the planet was in ruins. Gustav Zemler grew up in a society that matched violence with violence and then turned on itself when the Daleks were gone. The Intercity Wars sparked and spat around the globe for decades until volunteer members of Earth's nearest colonies returned to bring it back into order by force. Zemler was absorbed into the fledgling colonial military: the human species had to

fight back to survive. With typical and dogged belief in its own right to mete out destruction to those who would destroy it, Earth moved all its resources into preparing for attack. Gustav Zemler was a natural, his path from raw recruit to captain of a crack small-arms unit made easy by a natural predilection to violent confrontation and a well-nurtured distrust of the alien.

All that seemed like a long time ago now. Zemler was only thirty-six, although he'd made quite a name for himself fighting the Cybermen in a number of skirmishes on the periphery of Earth's colonial territories. But that beautiful and addictive spiral of destruction had led, eventually, to a military debacle which resulted in court martial and sudden disgrace.

Gustav Zemler had been forced to find alternative employment.

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'This Zemler guy sounds like a total git,' said Sam.

'He's a mercenary; Vigo replied. They were still on the shuttle, sitting in the cramped holding cell, the skull-numbing vibration of its engines loud enough to force them to speak up to be heard. It was an awful journey, and Sam was talking mainly to keep her mind off it.

'Anything for money, eh?' The ship shifted slightly and Sam felt her breakfast lurch uneasily.

'Exactly,' Vigo agreed. 'Zemler was - is - a violent thug: aggressive, paranoid, and totally uncontrollable. I've no idea why his men stayed with him after he left the colonial forces.'

'Perhaps they're aggressive, paranoid and totally unlikable too,' suggested Sam.

'Not all of them. One or two were almost decent, I suppose. Lunder was the best of the lot.'

'Lunder?'

'He used to be one of Zemler's men. He's a trained space commando -'

'Gosh.' Sam didn't try to hide her disdain.

'- an expert in weapons, tactics and unarmed combat. If anyone can save us now, Lunder can.'

'Real hero, huh?'

Vigo just smiled. 'He's a one-off, and I'm glad he's on our side. Lunder won't let us down.

Sam stirred slightly, recognising that there was more to come. 'But?' she prompted.

Vigo shrugged. 'Well, I'm beyond rescue now.'

'We'll get out of here,' Sam assured him.

'I wasn't talking about escape. I wasn't joking when I said I was dying. The radiation sickness is lethal.'

'How long were you exposed for?' asked Sam, suddenly realising she should worry.

Vigo smiled, reassuringly. 'Longer than you.'

'We're going to get you out of this. Think positive.'

Vigo laughed despite himself.'How do you stay so cheerful?'

'Your painkillers, I think.'

They laughed together this time, but there was fear just below the surface of Vigo's liquid brown eyes.'You don't seem worried about being captured,' he said.

Sam shrugged with one shoulder.'Been there, done that. There's no point in worrying. First chance we get, we escape.'

'What's your plan?' It was asked with more amusement than interest, as if he was talking to a rather precocious child.

Sam sighed.'Well... on the way in here I did see a door marked FLYER, near the cockpit. I once visited a sort of theme-park in the Cronns system which had flying bikes you could ride for fun. They were called flyers.'

'Yes, it's a single-seat antigrav bike. All these old Craab-class shuttles have one on board as standard. Useful for scout missions, reconnaissance, daring escape attempts and the like.'

'Did you say single-seat?'

'Yes, but you're welcome to it, Sam.' Vigo sat forward as if seriously considering the notion for the first time. 'If you get a chance, make for the ruins. Try to find Lunder and Julya. They'll get you off Janus Prime.'

'Don't count on it. Last time I saw your mate Julya she was hightailing it in the opposite direction with a friend of mine.'

***

Zemler watched the drone robot as it carried out a preprogrammed maintenance check on the command control module by his chair. There were hundreds of the beetle-shaped drones in the settlement - they had actually built the base dome, according to the basic design instructions hard-wired into their simple positronic brains. Now they carried out routine duties to keep it ticking over. Zemler hated them, partly because they reminded him uncomfortably of Cybermats, but mostly because they performed their duties without any reference to him. They were supposed to just follow a simple independent program, but he wouldn't put it past them to connive with each other, secretly by radio signals, and plot against him. They could do untold damage to the base dome if they wanted.

He lashed out with a foot and kicked the drone across the room. It clanged against the far wall and landed on its back on the floor. Tiny wheels spun uselessly in the air as it tried to right itself. Zemler raised his pistol and, taking careful aim, blew the thing to pieces with a single shot. He didn't know how many more there were still functioning, but any others which ventured into his private control room would meet with the same fate.

The doors to the control room opened and a trooper stepped in.

'Nwakanma,' said Zemler.'I'm glad you've come.'

The newcomer peered cautiously into the gloomy interior of his captain's control chamber. It reminded him of a cave, and it took his eyes several

seconds to adjust to the darkness. In the centre of the room was the only source of light - a wide circular pit in the metal flooring where the luminous blue sand of Janus Prime threw a dim glow into the air. It was by this light alone that the trooper could see his commanding officer. Like his men, Zemler wore a full spacesuit with helmet. He sat in a large command chair positioned on the far side of the chamber, hidden from view by the shadows.

'Sir,' said the trooper, his mouth dry. 'You did stipulate that all reports should be made to you in person."

'Indeed. Radio communication inside the dome is forbidden -punishable by death. I don't want the drones getting any ideas.'

'No, sir,' agreed Nwakanma, feeling a fragment of robot crunch under his boot. He decided to press ahead with his report. 'Sergeant Moslei is en route from the ruins, Captain. He has two Mendan prisoners on board the shuttle. You asked to be kept informed of his progress.'

'Yes,' Zemler confirmed. 'Sergeant Moslei is my most trusted man. Next to you, of course, Nwakanma.'

Nwakanma shifted uneasily. Moslei was his superior after all, but he knew only too well how much Zemler valued the loyalty of individual troopers. Zemler also knew the value of fear in command. Shortly after arriving on Janus Prime, when things had first started to go awry and no fewer than six of his men had deserted, Zemler had assembled the remaining unit outside the dome and offered any other troopers who wished to leave the chance to do so.

Three men had stepped forward. Zemler shot the first two through the head and made the third, now half paralysed with fear and the numbing realisation of the terrible mistake he had made, kneel in the sand and beg to be allowed to stay. There had actually been tears in the man's eyes. Zemler considered the soldier's plea carefully before putting a laser bolt between his eyes. Zemler had never liked men who cried, and the rest of his unit had stayed perfectly loyal ever since, particularly Nwakanma.

'I shall look forward to seeing Moslei and his guests soon enough,' Zemler continued. 'In the meantime, Nwakanma, how is the spidroid programme progressing? Are we still on schedule?'

'Yes. Despite the Mendan attempt to sabotage the operation, we are still functioning at one hundred per cent capacity. By the end of the next time cycle we should have six more fully functional spidroids in operation.'

'Good. At this rate we could move against the Mendans at any time,' said Zemler thoughtfully.'If it proved desirable.'

A puzzled note entered Nwakanma's voice.'Desirable? I thought that was the plan.'

Zemler leaned back in his chair."The plan... has changed.'

Nwakanma instinctively knew that his captain's attention had been drawn to the glowing pit in the centre of the room. Standing at its centre was a tall silver-blue column which glinted dully in the wan light at its base. Nwakanma couldn't discern any details of its construction in the gloom, but it was not a natural phenomenon. It had been designed and built long before any human had laid eyes on it.

No one knew what its function was, but the column had fascinated Zemler from the moment he had found it in the sandy wastes of Janus Prime. Nwakanma personally found it somewhat sinister, its lack of any obvious use or purpose disturbing him. Like some of his comrades, however, he felt uncomfortable with his commanding officer's obsession with it.

'You can go now, Nwakanma,' said Zemler, cutting through his trooper's ruminations. 'Let me know when Moslei returns.'

Nwakanma saluted and gratefully withdrew.

For a few seconds more Zemler considered the dark column at the centre of his room. Then he released the lid of a large plastic container by the side of his chair, and scooped out its contents: a pallid shape which might have been mistaken for the discarded glove of a spacesuit in this light.

But Zemler knew what it was. It had crawled up out of the pit days ago and provided him with all the answers he needed about the column. Now he held it up to the visor of his helmet and smiled as a number of spindly white legs played across its surface. The thing wriggled in his hand, trying to escape.

He'd have to do something about that.

***

'Doctor? What's his name, then?' asked Vigo.

Sam smiled. 'I don't really know, it's tricky to say. I'm not even sure if he can pronounce it, sometimes. So he likes to be known as "the Doctor".'

"That's daft.'

'OK, it's daft, but it's just the way it is. Names stick, I guess.'

'And do you like to be known as anything mysterious?'

'Fat chance. Just call me Sam.'

The small talk had begun to dry up. Sam couldn't even remember how they had got on to the subject, other than a desperate attempt to distract her new friend from thinking about how ill he was. And to distract herself from it, she supposed. She had tried to tell him about the Doctor, because that was enough to distract anybody.

'Do you believe me?' she asked suddenly.'About the Doctor?'

Vigo shrugged. 'In the present circumstances I can't be bothered to disbelieve you. The fact is you're here, we're prisoners, and we're on a one-way trip to meet Gustav Zemler. He'll probably feed us to his giant spiders if we're lucky. So you see, time-travelling alien doctors are not high on my list of priorities at the moment.'

'They should be,' said Sam, sighing

The shuttle banked to starboard and the two cellmates swayed uneasily with the motion. Sam felt her ears pop as the vessel lost altitude.

'We're coming in to land,' said Vigo, visibly paling.

Sam climbed unsteadily to her feet. The movement made her arm and shoulder flash with momentary pain. 'This might be our best chance to escape,' she told Vigo, sounding more confident than she felt. Her wound was going to be more of a liability than she had reckoned with; how far would the painkillers disguise it? 'If they take us off this thing the

same way we came on board, we'll have to pass the flyer compartment. Get ready to move if the chance comes up.'

'It's a single-seat flyer.'Vigo reminded her.

'I'm only light, and you're no heavyweight. No problem.'

'It'll never work. You're mad.'

The door to the cell clanged open and a spacesuited trooper gestured with his gun for them to come out. Sam and Vigo were marched down the length of the crew compartment to the exit doors. The noise of the shuttle's landing rockets was phenomenal.

Sam stared at the heavy hatchway to her left marked FLYER. There was a large red handle inset labelled QUICK RELEASE.

'Fancy a ride?' asked a harsh voice behind her. She jerked guiltily. Troopers all around her were starting to laugh.

'Used to have one of these when I was a kid,' said the trooper, rapping on the hatch with his armoured knuckle.'Yamazuki 4500. Fantastic. I'm always happiest in the saddle - how about you?'

Sam struggled to control her racing heartbeat. She was sweating profusely. Even if she got the hatch open she wouldn't have time to work out how to start the damned thing before a dozen troopers fried her where she stood. It was a stupid idea. A momentary feeling of hopelessness opened up like an abyss in her stomach as the shuttle's main door hissed apart with a blast of hydraulic vapour. The chill air of Janus Prime made goosebumps rise on her skin.

The shuttle had touched down on some sort of landing area adjacent to a large dome. The surface of the dome was made up of interlocking hexagonal panels, and its cheap temporary appearance reminded her of a prefab building assembled like a snap-together kit.

Visible from where they stood was a low, black-grilled cage appended to the dome. Armed men were poking long metal poles through the bars and laughing when something growled and spat viciously from within.

'Spider pen,' said Vigo quietly. 'I hoped I'd never lay eyes on it again.'

The troopers by the cage were still busy goading the creature inside. Suddenly one of them was dragged forwards as his pole was grabbed and pulled. He clanged against the bars and gave a yell of fear. His comrades renewed their efforts with their own sticks until the unseen monster released its grip and the trooper could back away. Sam gave Vigo a questioning glance, but it was the sergeant, Moslei, who answered: "That's where Big Henry lives. Biggest damn spider you've ever seen. We feed him on flies and any Mendans that Captain Zemler doesn't like the look of.'

A slow chill began to seep through Sam's body as the men around her guffawed. She watched Vigo swallow with difficulty, his kindly eyes now wide and glassy with suppressed terror.

'Don't worry,' said one of the other troopers, leering at Sam.'I'm sure the captain will like the look of you.'

Chapter Five
Mendo

'So when did you realise you were on a different planet altogether?' There was no disguising the incredulity in Julya's voice.

'Almost immediately,' replied the Doctor. "The gravity was slightly different, so was the negative ion level, the smell...'

'The smell?'Julya actually laughed.

'This is a more oxygen-rich atmosphere, and the nitrogen level's different too. And there's a faint smell of -' the Doctor sniffed sharply - 'cinnamon in the air. Lovely.'

'You're crazy.'

The Doctor just grinned at her, sitting back so that the wind caught his hair and blew it out behind his head. They were in Julya's open-top skimmer, speeding along the single wide road leading from the Link site to Newtown. Julya loved the skimmer, loved driving it. The Doctor had hopped nimbly into the passenger seat. Julya could tell he was still thinking about Sam, still considering how and when he could get back to her.

It was mid-afternoon and the sun was out. All around them, on either side of the roads, were undulating fields and meadows, some of them cultivated, one or two thick with wheat or barley. In the distance, mountains were nearly lost in a haze of lilac clouds. By far the biggest thing to be seen, however, was the sun: a huge orange disc in the pale-green sky, bright enough to be warm, but not too bright to look at.

'Janus,'said Julya.

'After the two-faced god?'

'That's what we call her. It's listed on the charts as Janus GM2797, a red giant on the edge of the Milky Way. Twenty-seven light years from Earth.'

'You're a long way from home.' The Doctor was gazing up at the bloated sun now, his eyes alive with fascination.

'This is home,' said Julya, gesturing around her.

'How long have you been here?'

'Long enough. The colony's thriving. There were five babies born this year, the first real Mendans.'

The Doctor gestured towards the cultivated fields flashing past the skimmer.'This is all yours, then?'

'Yep, the whole planet. Menda's just one big garden waiting for us. Temperate climate, edible indigenous fruit and vegetables, compatible ecology, clean drinkable water. Loads of room. Fresh air!'Julya flung back her head and breathed in deeply through her nose to demonstrate.

The Doctor smiled. 'It's perfect. So what about Janus Prime?'

'Ah. Menda's evil twin.'

The Doctor took his eyes off the view to give her a puzzled look.

'Janus Prime is on the far side of the sun,' she said.'Diametrically opposite, in fact. But its moon is locked in a geostationary orbit, putting the planet in permanent total eclipse.'

'Are there any other planets in this solar system?'

'None.'

'What's the big attraction, then? I mean, this Zemler fellow and all his soldiers. They seem to have set up an operation of some kind on Janus Prime.'

'That's a long story.'

'They always are.'

They drove for a while in silence, the Doctor enjoying the view while Julya negotiated a series of tight bends running down a hillside. At the bottom of the valley was Newtown. Why did colonists always call their first cities that? wondered the Doctor. It was a typical example of its type: prefab domes clustered at its centre, with more permanent,

purpose-built constructions surrounding it. A number of outlying homes had been erected around the edges as families grew. Everyone was still nestling around the central hub, probably the original landing site. There was something there in the middle, something odd, but it was still too far away for the Doctor to see clearly.

'What's that? the Doctor asking, smiling and pointing at the oddly shaped construction at Newtown's centre.

'That; said Julya, 'is all that remains of the ship that brought us here. It... "landed" right there.'

'Well, they say any landing you can walk away from is a good one.' They were closer now, and the Doctor could see some details. It had been a big ship, but there wasn't much left of it on view. Most of it had probably been salvaged for materials. All that remained was the basic hull shape, curving up and over what appeared to be a natural amphitheatre.

'It's used as a church now,'Julya explained, killing her speed a little as the skimmer approached the outlying houses. A flock of sheep burst away from the edge of the road as the skimmer buzzed past. 'We hold a service there every year to commemorate planetfall.'

The Doctor smiled to himself at the word 'planetfall'.'Earth year or Mendan year?' he asked.

'Mendan.'

'Good for you.'

Julya drove the skimmer past a tractor piloted by a man with a beard and wide-brimmed hat. He waved a hand, and Julya waved back.

'Where are you from, then? Earth or one of the other colony worlds?'

'Earth; said the Doctor. 'Sometimes. Tell me more about this planet. About the colony.'

'Well, we left Earth when I was nineteen years old,'Julya said. She guided the skimmer past a series of prefab farms, chickens darting erratically from under the repulsor field.

'It was a long trip, and the starship we bought wasn't all that huge. A

Spacemaster at the end of its useful life.'

The Doctor knew that in the early years of Earth's period of galactic colonisation many families, sometimes whole communities, would band together to pay for a voyage off planet. Towards the end of the twenty-second century many people had been desperate to leave Earth, often selling all their belongings to pay for a trip to the stars and a chance to start a new life on another world. The pioneering spirit that had carried settlers from Europe to America was now taking the human species out into deep space and an uncertain future.

'There were over a thousand of us,'Julya continued.'Engineers, farmers, scientists, all with something to contribute.'

'What went wrong?'

'A rogue meteor holed the ship on its way into the system. We limped the last part of the journey and crash-landed. Only two people were killed, which was incredible. We left the hull of the ship where it was as a monument.'

'So where does this Zemler person fit in?"

'Gustav Zemler...'Julya looked up at gulls wheeling in the sky. 'We hired him and his men as protection for the voyage.'

Again, this was common practice at the time: the early space lanes provided rich pickings and easy targets for pirates and, sometimes, hostile alien raiders. Colonists would hire the services of freelance military men to protect them until they reached their destination. The soldiers would then return to Earth in the colony vessel once the settlers were established.

'Zemler had served in the Cyber-conflicts.We didn't know it at the time but he had left the Space Force under a cloud. Dishonourably discharged, I think they said, along with his entire unit. I didn't know what it had been all about - I didn't want to. He just wasn't what you'd call a good man.'

'The sort who likes to pull spiders' legs off,' said the Doctor,'and replace them with mechanical ones.'

Julya smiled grimly.'Right.We took them on and paid them what we

could. But when the Spacemaster crashed it took their passage back home with it. They were stranded here with us. Menda is a long way from any of the established space lanes. That's why we came here.We wanted a fresh start, to be completely independent and self-sufficient.'

'But life on the farm wasn't Zemler's cup of tea?'

'Absolutely not. He was furious. The trouble started almost immediately. He blamed the colony leaders for allowing the ship to be damaged, which was ridiculous. We didn't want the soldiers to be stuck here - they were a damned nuisance. They weren't interested in the hopes and dreams which brought us here. They just wanted their money and a return ticket to Mother Earth.

'We split into two camps straight away, the colonists and the soldiers. There was no open conflict then, but the mood was ugly. Things only got really bad when we discovered the link.'

'I was wondering when we'd get to that.'

They were driving through the outskirts of Newtown now, past block-built houses and stores, with more people and skimmers in evidence.

'We became aware of it soon after arrival.We scouted the region where the ship crashed and found the site where the Link was; I suppose we realised it was some kind of ancient artefact pretty quickly.'

'There's been a civilisation on Menda before...' postulated the Doctor.

'Oh yes. There's not much evidence left, and none of us was equipped or trained for an archaeological dig, but the Link was obviously the product of advanced technology.'

'You said it was a matter transmitter.'

'Uh-huh. It was Gustav Zemler who actually found it - he explored the ruins and came across that distortion effect it creates in the air. No one guessed it was a direct two-way transmat link to Janus Prime - not straight away, at least. Not until someone saw a whopping great spider come out of it:

"The spider creatures were using it?'

'Accidentally, yes. They're no more intelligent than your average cow but a couple of them must've wandered into the transmat link on Janus Prime and wound up on Menda. It was a bit of a shock at first - for us, I mean. It didn't take long for the idea of using it to get to Janus Prime to come about, and we weren't short of volunteers - Zemler and his men were itching to do something macho and find a way off Menda. That's when our problems really started, I suppose. Anyway, here we are..."

Julya pulled the skimmer up outside a long building made up of compartmentalised blocks, like a giant version of a child's toy. The Doctor recognised the cheap, portable materials used to construct living accommodation in colony towns the galaxy over. The repulsor motors died with a mournful whine and the car settled on its default antigravity cushion. Julya climbed out of the skimmer and beckoned the Doctor to follow.

'This is where you can stay while you're here,' she told him as she entered the cool foyer. The Doctor glanced up at the green sky before he went inside. It was getting darker. Janus was a shimmering orange dome over the tops of the surrounding buildings. The breeze that had been so exhilarating on the way here was now cold and unfriendly. He wondered if Sam was feeling cold, or friendless, on Janus Prime.

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'Christ, it's hot in here,' said Sam, wiping her hand down her face. The palm of her hand came away slick with sweat. 'Who turned up the central heating?'

'It's the power plant; said Vigo. 'We're right by it.'

They had been transferred from the patrol ship's brig to a detention cell at the base. It was almost identical, except for the fact that the walls were some kind of heavy-duty plastic and there was no vibration through the floor from the engines. There was, however, a lot of heat.

"The reactor should be shielded,'Vigo went on,'but somehow I don't think environmental issues are top of Zemler's priorities.'

'Is that where the radiation comes from?' asked Sam warily.

Vigo smiled. The light was a little better in this cell and Sam could see that the man's teeth were crooked and yellow. 'Well, it might not do us

much good in the long term, but it's all right in small doses. Just like Janus Prime itself, in fact.'

'What do you mean?'

'The radiation sickness I've got comes from the planet itself. There's some kind of radioactivity here that plays havoc with your metabolism. Pickles it right there while you wait. I've been on this craphole of a planet too long now...'

Sam watched him as he spoke, his eyes unfocused. 'I came here a day before the others. They were supposed to be picking me up.When Zemler's troops rumbled us we had to split up and then everything went wrong. I was picked up, all right - by Moslei.You say the others got away?'

'I'm not sure, really.' Sam thought this was straying from the point a little. 'I mean, I only met Julya. She got away with the Doctor, but I don't know what happened after that. I was shot and thrown in with you.'

'We'd know if they'd been caught,'Vigo said, almost as if he was trying to convince himself. "That means they either got away, or...' He left the thought unspoken.

'They might try to rescue us,' Sam offered.

Vigo lips twitched in a smile.'Don't get your hopes up, Sam.'

God, it was hot in here. Sam wiped at the sweat again. Her shoulder was starting to hurt more now that the painkiller was wearing off. She didn't want to ask Vigo if he had another one yet - she wanted to see how bad the pain got before she couldn't stand it any longer, and also wanted to hope for a little longer that he actually had any more. Screwing up her courage, Sam asked Vigo the other question that was burning in her brain:

'Vigo, how long is too long?'

'How long've you been here?'

'I don't know.' Sam checked the chunky black diving watch on her wrist. The luminous dial was obscured by a big crack across the glass.'About an hour now, I think. Maybe longer.'

'You'll be all right for a while.'

Why was he being so vague? Sam felt like screaming and shaking him by the shoulders. Couldn't he see how scared she was? Radiation poisoning, for God's sake! When would it start? Would she be sick? Vomit? Would there be sores? She'd seen pictures of people suffering from radiation sickness on Earth; she remembered sitting on her bed and staring at the images in her • room, pictures of the CND rally she'd been stopped from going on. She'd read the literature and talked to her parents about it. Talked! Now she was going to experience it first-hand. Good standard safety checks, Doctor. Well done. And while we're at it, where the bloody hell are you?

A sharp twinge in her shoulder concentrated her mind. She sniffed and wiped her face with her jacket, which was currently folded over her knees.'What are they going to do with us?'

'Wish I knew. They don't seem to be in much of a hurry to do it, whatever it is.'

'Maybe they've just left us here to cook,' Sam said, and then laughed.

Vigo wiped the perspiration from his forehead and laughed too. Then they were both laughing, stupidly. Until they heard the bolts being drawn back on the cell door.

***

Lunder stared at the man in the mirror: he needed a shave. Thick neck, tight lips, straight nose. The eyes were too narrow to be friendly. The irises were grey, so what little you could see of them looked like little chips of ice. The hair above the thick brows was short and black.

Look at you, thought Lunder. Some kind of tough guy. Couldn't even save your friend. You'd have been better off staying with Zemler and Moslei, then at least everyone would know which side you were on.

The robot nurse finished scanning his arm and transmitted its report to the medical computer. Lunder turned to look at how long it recommended further bed rest, then said.'Forget it. I'm out of here.'

He picked up his vest and pulled it over his head. That was easy

enough, the painkillers took care of the minor cuts and contusions; and if he moved carefully he could hide the limp.

'You don't have to be a hero,' said Kleiner.

Lunder looked at him as he pulled on his boots.'I'm not waiting around here for old age.'

'You're no good to me - or anyone here - if you're not fully fit.'

'It isn't a problem." Lunder winced as he straightened up but quickly turned it into a smile. Smiles never felt comfortable on his face, though. 'Where's Jurya?'

'Gone back to Newtown, with the Doctor.'

'Oh, yeah, right, you told me.'

Kleiner knew Lunder hadn't forgotten. "The council said they want to see you.'

'Me?' Lunder slipped his cigar between his teeth.

'You and Julya. And the Doctor.'

'Why him?'

Kleiner took a deep breath. 'Because Julya wanted the council to meet him; She was very... generous in her praise for what he did on Janus Prime.'

Lunder was silent for a moment.'I don't trust him.'

'Is that because you can't account for his presence on Janus Prime or because he's impressed Julya so much?'

Lunder glowered at him.'I don't trust him because he's not one of us and not one of Zemler's men. And I know all of his men, remember.'

Kleiner stood up from where he had been perched on the end of the diagnostic bed.'I remember.'

Lunder watched him leave the infirmary, not sure what the old man

meant. All he did know was that ever since the Doctor had shown up, nothing seemed straightforward any more. He sighed, flicked his cigar into the sink and followed Kleiner out.

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Julya stepped up to the door and halted. She could unlock it, because it was actually her door, but it didn't feel right. Instead she stood outside in the hallway and thought. Why had she offered the Doctor her rooms to stay in? He was attractive, certainly, but she knew practically nothing about him. He seemed to have a knack of getting information without giving any away himself. Her priority was Menda's security, not this stranger, so why was she worried about the interrogation he was going to be subjected to? Why did -

'Come on in, it's open!' called a voice from behind the door, making her start.

Julya pushed the door aside and went in. The Doctor was nowhere to be seen. Then she heard the sound of running water, and his voice again, singing a song about leaving hearts in San Francisco. Julya was puzzled.Why would he sing about a city that disappeared into the sea over two centuries ago?

Abruptly the singing stopped.'Won't be a moment - I'm in the shower.'

'Right.' Julya stood perfectly still. She checked her watch. No, definitely on time. Maybe he was just running a bit late.

'Sorry, I'm just running a bit late,' he said, emerging from the bathroom with just a white towel around his waist. A wisp of steam followed him out. His hair was dry, but clean, although it still fell back from his high forehead in a long, wild tangle of chestnut curls. The blue eyes were bright in the long, pale face.

'Um,' said Julya.

'It's so long since I last had a shower,' the Doctor continued enthusiastically.'I mean a wet one, with water.'

Julya watched him - she couldn't help it - as he crossed the room and began rummaging through the pile of clothes deposited by the robot laundry. She recognised them as the same costume he had worn on

Janus Prime. He scooped them up and disappeared into the bedroom, reappearing a ludicrously short time later fully dressed. The white shirt stayed open at the throat, however, with the silk cravat loose around his neck.

'How long have we got?' he asked.

Julya checked her watch again. "Thirty minutes. We're fine.'

'Good.' The Doctor opened the windows that led on to the balcony and stepped outside. Julya followed him.

'Lovely night,' he said, looking up at the sky. It was a dark, lustrous green, the colour of his velvet frock coat, studded with the tiny bright pinpricks of distant suns. "There's the Pleiades. Crab Nebula. Cams' Star. Earth's that way.'

Julya followed the direction his long finger was pointing in, but all she could see were more stars.

'Do you ever get homesick?' asked the Doctor.

'For Earth? No. Do you?'

'For Earth? Sometimes. Then I get homesick for somewhere else, or somewhen .'

'Your own planet?'

He smiled.

'Never. My home is with Sam.' He sighed, deeply, staring into space. He looked like a child whose toy had been taken away from him. 'Oh Sam, Sam, Sam

'Sometimes I miss the blue skies,' said Julya, hurriedly changing the subject, leaning forward on the balcony rail. It brought her closer to where he stood, still looking up at the stars.'Menda's sky is so beautiful and green but...'

'I've a weakness for blue skies myself,' said the Doctor, distantly.

She turned to look at him. Somehow he had fastened the stiff wing collar

of his shirt without her noticing, and the cravat was tied beneath his angular jaw. He was fixing a tiepin in the centre of the grey silk, an amber jewel surrounded by tiny silver leaves.

'How do I look?' he asked, stepping back. 'I don't want to disappoint your superiors.'

'They're not my superiors. We're all equals here. And you look fine.'

'Of course. Sorry. Thanks.'

Julya looked at him expectantly, waiting. It was chilly out here on the balcony and she shivered.

'Come on, then,' said the Doctor. He went back inside and she trailed after him. 'You can tell me more about Janus Prime on the way.'

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The cell door opened and a spacesuited figure filled the gap. It took Sam a moment to realise there was no helmet attached. The face revealed above the thick circular metal collar of the suit was young and not unattractive. The skin was shiny, but that was probably perspiration.

'Yes?' said Sam, sitting up. 'What can we do for you? Don't remember calling room service.'

'Captain Zemler wants to see you,' said the young spaceman.

Sam drew in a sharp breath. Not because of what the man had said, but because when he opened his mouth to speak, thick strings of flesh joined his lips like strands of hot cheese on a pizza. Then she realised his flesh wasn't shiny with sweat.

It was melting.

Chapter Six
Strange Radiation

The drone robot bumped into the Doctor's shoe and gave a tiny squeak. The Doctor looked down and smiled.

'Hello!' He scooped the little machine up and peered closely at its unsophisticated sensor array. 'Are you lost?'

The robot's wheels whirred and it squeaked again.

'Here,' said the Doctor, altering his grip slightly so that he could dip into one of his coat pockets. 'Let's do something about that.' He produced a tiny oil can and carefully applied a little lubrication to the wheel mechanism. Then he set the drone back down and it whizzed off along the floor in silence.

The Doctor screwed the cap back on the oil can and returned it to a pocket, a look of happiness transforming his otherwise long face into one of boyish enthusiasm.

'Can we stick to the matter at hand, Doctor?' asked a man sitting opposite him with a voice full of weary patience. 'I believe we were discussing your credentials.'

'Of course,' agreed the Doctor amiably. He was sitting at the circular conference table in the centre of the council chamber, facing a panel of interrogators, which included the colony's nominal leaders.

The atmosphere had been sombre - the facts regarding Vigo's disappearance on Janus Prime had already been discussed before the Doctor had been allowed in. Almost immediately the mood had changed from grim to awkward. No one really knew what to do with him, but everyone agreed that the first step should be to question him formally. However, even the simplest queries had been met with polite obfuscation, and a request for identification had produced nothing more than a dog-eared senior citizen's travelcard from the planet Angmenta. 'The picture isn't even of you,' one of the panel had remarked sourly.

'Well... it is and it isn't; the Doctor had replied.

Julya had cringed, her toes actually curling in her boots, and glanced

surreptitiously at Lunder. He was sitting back in his chair, arms folded, regarding the Doctor with a look of simmering dislike. Julya's heart sank even lower.

'Why wasn't I allowed to look at the Link?' The Doctor posed the question in a sudden, offhand manner. 'Julya made sure I was whisked away from the vicinity just as I started asking questions. Why?'

The Doctor spoke clearly and precisely but without hostility. He appeared genuinely interested, but the fact remained that he was supposed to be providing the answers, not asking the questions. Anyone else in his position might have been suitably intimidated, but the Doctor's cool blue eyes stared at them all with a look that might have been genuine respect or complete contempt, it was impossible to tell which.

The council chamber was situated in the large dome near the centre of Newtown. It was circular with high windows, which, owing to the darkness outside, reflected the interior like a series of tall mirrors in an old-fashioned ballroom. The Doctor, in his elegant clothes, looked quite at home. The problem was, everyone else wore the colony's equivalent of business wear -plain tunics, black trousers, boots - and this did tend to highlight the Doctor's appearance as an outsider.

'I think, Doctor, it would be wiser for you to answer our questions,' advised Anni Zeck, an austere woman of indeterminate age and thundercloud-grey hair.'You must be aware that we are in a state of conflict with those occupying Janus Prime and cannot discuss operational security matters with any stranger who happens by.'

'That's a pity,' replied the Doctor levelly, 'because my next question was going to be: what exactly are you doing on Janus Prime?'

'This from a man who refuses to identify himself properly,' said Lunder.

'We've been through that already,' said the Doctor patiently.

'At least tell us who you're working for,' urged Anni Zeck. 'Are you from Earth Control?'

'I don'twork for anybody. I don't come from anywhere you'd know, and I didn't even mean to land on Janus Prime in the first place.'

'You were forced down,' a hook-nosed gentleman read from his notes.

'Yes.'

'Although Lunder here says that he saw no spacecraft coming in to land while he was on Janus Prime.'

"The TARDIS is very discreet.'

'Quite. And after you wereforced down , the first thing you did was save Julya's life...' Hooknose made this sound very melodramatic.

'It's true,' said Julya wearily. 'I'll vouch for him.'

Lunder sat forward and removed the cigar from between his teeth.'That's not enough.'

'It's enough for me,'Julya replied firmly.

'Listen,' said the Doctor, managing to cut through the argument without raising his voice. 'Let me get one thing straight. Am I a prisoner here?'

'No,' said Anni Zeck.

'Yes,' said Lunder.

The Doctor looked from one to the other. 'Well, one of you is wrong, surely.'

Lunder looked at the tip of his cigar, a muscle in his forearm twitching slightly.

'You're not a prisoner, Doctor,' said Jonah Gilty. It was the first time he had spoken at this meeting, his voice a deep rumble from the bottom of a barrel chest.

The Doctor stood up.'In that case, I'll be on my way. Thank you, gentlemen... madam.'

'This is stupid,' said Lunder angrily, also getting to his feet. 'At worst this guy is an impostor. At best he's some kind of lunatic. We shouldn't be wasting time with him like this!'

'Not when you could be busy polishing your weaponry,' agreed the

Doctor. Lunder began to move forward, but Kleiner put a hand on his arm.

'Sit down!'

Lunder's nostrils flared as he continued to meet the Doctor's stare.

'And you too, Doctor, please.'

With a sigh the Doctor dropped back into his chair. 'So I am a prisoner then.'

'Doctor, you must understand our position,' said Gilly.

'I might if you wouldexplain it to me.'

Gilly paused, and then appeared to make a decision. 'Julya has no reason to lie for you, Doctor, and every reason to be trusted. For the time being I am prepared to accept you at face value based solely on her support for you. Let this be taken as a measure of the esteem in which she is held here.'

'I understand.' The Doctor flicked a glance at Julya and nodded.

'But do not let that diminish our regard for Lunder either,' continued Gilly. 'We greatly value his opinion in all matters of Menda's security.'

'It's all right,' the Doctor conceded. 'Some of my best friends have been soldiers.'

'Let's just get this over with,' growled Lunder, finally taking his seat again.

Gilly grumbled something and then laid the palms of his hands flat on the table. His twinkling eyes fixed on the Doctor. 'We'll skip the issue of your name for the time being. "Doctor" is good enough for me. Instead we can concentrate on your actions on Janus Prime. I hear you destroyed two of Gustav Zemler's spidroids.

'No no no no,' said the Doctor. 'I think those poor creatures had been through quite enough, but they weren't at the point where they needed putting out of their misery. I just deactivated the cybernetic control system of the first one and confused the second.'

'You make that sound easy, Doctor.'

'Well, I'm an expert in confusion.'

'I don't doubt it.'

'I must say I admire your new planet,' the Doctor said, smiling. 'It's very beautiful, very reminiscent of Earth in the old days. It's a pity your colony's future here is at risk...'

'You mean the Zemler situation on Janus Prime?'

There he goes again, thought Julya. Prompting answers without actually asking questions.

'Zemler was always troublesome,' continued Gilly. 'His men weren't much better - present company excluded.' Gilly nodded at Lunder, who just glowered at the surface of the table in front of him. 'I think the Space Marines must have been desperate foranyone to join up. We didn't know it at the time, but Zemler had been discharged from military service for grievous misconduct.'

'Julya mentioned something of the sort.'

'I don't have to listen to this.'With a scrape of his chair, Lunder stood up. 'You're all wasting time talking to Mm - he bareh/ looked at the Doctor - 'when you should be thinking of a way to rescue Vigo.'

'And Sam!' added the Doctor.'Please.'

As the commando turned to leave, Julya moved to stop him, but Kleiner gave a minute shake of his head. There was an uncomfortable silence as Lunder left the room.

The Doctor looked at Gilly, who said, 'I'm afraid the subject of Zemler is a rather painful one for Lunder.'

'Who is Vigo?' asked the Doctor, a little impatiently.

'One of Lunder's reconnaissance team. He was on an intelligence-gathering mission to Janus Prime. Lunder and Julya were sent to collect him.'

'We think Vigo may have been captured,' explained Julya. 'Zemler's men were waiting for us at the rendezvous point.'

'Which is when I found you beating a hasty retreat to the link,' realised the Doctor. 'Perhaps Sam has been captured, too.'

'Perhaps,' said the woman, with what the Doctor could only describe as a noticeable lack of conviction.

The Doctor shifted slightly in his seat and turned the full force of his blue eyes on the trio of councillors. The stare took in Julya and Kleiner as well.'I think it's time you told me more about this Gustav Zemler person.'

'Of course. I won't go into the sordid details, but it involved some kind of skirmish on Titan 317. Apparently Zemler's unit was charged with the task of eliminating a squad of Cybermen from a secure research bunker. The Cybermen had taken every man, woman and child there hostage, so the bunker couldn't be nuked. Zemler and his men went in and took the Cybermen on face to face, using plasma weapons. They dealt with the Cybermen all right - and the hostages too. No one survived the flreflght apart from Zemler and his squad.'

'I can't see the authorities being too happy about that.'

'Zemler and his entire platoon were court-martialled and charged with the murder of one hundred and thirty-two unarmed civilians. He was discharged and that was the end of it. So much for military justice. He became a mercenary, along with those men in his company still loyal to him. We had the bad luck to hire him as protection for the voyage here.'

Jonah Gilly let out a short, sour laugh. 'It's just as well we weren't attacked by pirates or aliens. Zernler would've probably shot us as well.'

'Not all of Zemler's men were bad,' said Julya.'Lunder didn't join us for money.'

If the Doctor was surprised to learn that Lunder had been one of Zemler's men, he didn't show it. He smiled gently at Julya and said,'You care a great deal about him, don't you?'

'He's a good man in a difficult situation,' replied Julya. 'We couldn't have managed without him on our side.'

The Doctor nodded, thoughtfully.

'Lunder has been a great help; acknowledged Gilly, eager to support his people.'He and Kleiner set up our defensive position together. Do you know what happened after we arrived on Menda?'

'Broadly, yes. With no way back home, Zemler decided he couldn't face life as a farm hand and decided to carry on fighting instead.'

'Exactly!'

Kleiner took a deep breath.'There is a little more to it than that. Zemler's story would actually be quite sad if it wasn't so terrible. He insisted on going to Janus Prime - being convinced the Link was a matter transmitter, which could provide a way back to Earth space. I suppose you could say he was obsessed by the idea. The trip was a disappointment, in more ways than one. Janus Prime was in ruins and unsuitable for habitation. You've seen it, Doctor. You know what it's like: it's a dump, and a dangerously radioactive one at that.'

The Doctor looked up sharply. 'Radioactive?'

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Sam tried hard not to stare at the young man, but it was difficult. Not only were his lips stuck together with strands of goo but his skin seemed to be sliding down his face like hot Plasticine.

'Pretty nasty, isn't it?' he said. His voice was full of phlegm, or so it seemed. Sam suspected it wasn't due to a bad cold.

'Been this way for months now. It starts off slow, then it gets faster. Before you know it, your hands are sticking to everything you pick up and your skin's peeling off like fruit rind.'

Sam shuddered. The pain in her shoulder was a lot worse now, and she was suffering sudden changes in body temperature. She had been hot in the cell, but now she was cold, chilled to the bone, and worried that it was the first signs of the radiation sickness.

The guard had ordered her andVigo out of the cell at gunpoint, but they weren't in any condition to cause trouble. Vigo was definitely ill, and Sam

was in too much pain. The guard was taking no chances, though.

He marched them down a short passage to another, larger corridor which curved around the circumference of the base.

Sam stopped and helped Vigo to stand, because he was swaying as though he was about to faint.

The guard curled a sagging lip up from loose teeth. 'Move,' he said.'Captain Zemler doesn't like to be kept waiting.'

And then Vigo fell down and hit the metal flooring with a loud clang.

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'Why didn't you tell me Janus Prime was radioactive?' the Doctor demanded. He was clearly furious, but even under stress his words were still spoken with quick precision.'Sam's there. I have to go back for her.'

'It's not quite as simple as that,' said Kleiner.

'On the contrary, it's very simple. The Link must be ready for use by now. Just take me back there and I'll go."

'No, Doctor, you don't understand. The effects of the radiation are cumulative. We can stand exposure for only so long before it becomes lethal. That's why Lunder and Julya were limited in the amount of time they could spend on Janus Prime. You weren't there long enough, either.'

'What about Sam?'

'It's impossible to say for certain.'

'Then I can't afford to wait any longer.' The Doctor moved towards the door.

'But you don't know the full facts!'

The Doctor fixed Kleiner with a piercing stare. 'Does anyone here know the full facts?'

'When Zemler went to Janus Prime, he was looking for a way back to

Earth,' said Gilly. 'But there isn't one. There was no other way off the planet other than the transmat Link, and that led straight back here.'

Julya said, 'Zemler sent two men back from Janus Prime to report, but it was too late. The radiation had got to them, right through to the bone. They both died in minutes, almost as if being removed from the source of the radiation accelerated its effect.'

The Doctor paused, fascinated.

Kleiner said, 'It wasn't any kind of radiation poisoning we recognised, or could treat by conventional means. It seems to destroy the body's cellular structure. The men simply melted away before our eyes. I've never seen anything like it before.'

A look of horror filled the Doctor's face. 'I should have realised... the luminous sand. The soldiers all wearing spacesuits.

Kleiner nodded. 'Zemler and his men were effectively stranded on Janus Prime, locked in spacesuits to try to slow down the rate of decay.'

'Zemler went berserk,' said Julya. 'He was pretty psychotic anyway, especially after the crash, but this just flipped him sideways. He couldn't send his men back through the Link unless they wore sealed spacesuits.'

'We gave them what help we could; said Gilly. 'Provisions, any medical supplies that we could spare. We even gave them the materials and drones for erecting a permanent base there, including one of the shuttlecraft we brought with us from Earth.'

'And he repaid you by sending cybernetically controlled giant spiders through the Link to attack you,' finished the Doctor.

Kleiner nodded. 'Zemler has a small team of very efficient field cyberneticists as part of his unit, and they were able to apply their combat techniques to the indigenous life forms. They're called spidroids, to differentiate the augmented creatures from the native ones.'

'We had no choice - we had to fight to survive,' said Gilly.''That's when Lunder came in useful.'

'The first attacks were terrible,' added Julya. 'He was the only one who

knew what to do, how to fight them.'

'With his help we were able to take counteroffensive measures as well,' continued Kleiner. 'Nothing major, just guerrilla tactics mainly, using a small strike team for intelligence-gathering missions. Julya here and Vigo were both volunteers - Lunder trained them.'

Julya said. 'We'd actually reached something of a standoff situation: Zemler had Janus Prime sewn up tight, and we made sure he couldn't send any more spidroids through the Link/

'By building that reception chamber around the Link itself,' realised the Doctor. 'Anything much bigger than a man coming through would find it uncomfortably snug.'

'Fatally snug.'

The Doctor gave a hard smile.'A simple if inelegant solution.'

'We still have to stay alert for attacks from Zemler's men, though.With their suits sealed they can still come through and -'

'All very exciting, I'm sure,' said the Doctor,'but Lunder is right about one thing: we should be finding a way to rescue Vigo and Sam, not sitting here discussing it.'

'Doctor, we just don't know the exact safe limit of exposure to the radiation on Janus Prime. It may be different for different people. It's impossible to say how long your friend's got,' argued Gilly.

'But she may have been captured. I have to know for sure!' The Doctor's voice was growing steadily louder.

Kleiner said, "The effect is cumulative, but periods away from the source do allow a healthy body to recover. I just can't risk sending anyone back to Janus Prime with you yet, Doctor.'

'You won't let me go alone?'

'You'd be throwing your life away with your friend's.'

The Doctor sat down glumly and ran a hand through his mane of hair. 'There is something else bothering me,' he said eventually.

'What?'

'The Link.'

'What about it?'

'You all keep telling me it's a matter transmitter...'

'So?'

'It's not a matter transmitter at all,' said the Doctor simply.

Chapter Seven
Zemler's World

Jon Moslei looked out across Janus Prime and tried to remember what a normal planet looked like. If he shifted his position slightly he could peer up through the curve of the Plexiglas window and see Janus Prime's single moon - or rather the dull black disc permanently blotting out the sun. He could see the orange corona around its circumference but most of the light came from Janus Prime's radioactive surface. There was even sufficient to illuminate the surface of the moon; within the confines of the giant black disc above he could discern the faint green rings of craters and valleys. The longer he looked the more massive it seemed: hanging like an unspoken threat over the planet below.

Moslei sat back and released the seal on his helmet. He took it off and breathed the recycled air of the base dome. So much better than the recycled air of his spacesuit. To tell the truth he sometimes missed the fresh clean air of Menda. He wasn't sure any longer how much time had elapsed since he, Zemler, and the rest of the platoon had stepped through the Link and crossed the 280 million miles to Janus Prime, but it felt like a lifetime.

Moslei had been born in 2162, from an illegal gene bank on the outskirts of New Paris on Earth. His parent had died in the Dalek invasion and young Jon, as an orphan, was shipped to the Moon. The Space Marines used to snap up homeless kids in those days, and within a week the young Moslei had found himself still grieving at a boot camp on Mars. Minor frontier skirmishes with the odd alien race followed, and he returned to Earth only once more when Zemler and the squad were suspended following the disaster on Titan 317.

Moslei had stuck by Zemler then; they all had. It had been Zemler who had recommended Moslei's promotion to sergeant to the Progression Board, so he owed him. And besides, it had been Moslei who suggested a direct troop assault on the Titan 317 bunker. That turned out to be a terrible mistake, but it was entirely due to poor Intelligence. The court martial agreed, only it stipulated poor intelligence with a small T.

But it was easy for them to be so righteous; they hadn't been there, ankle deep in the blood and hydraulic slime. There were Cybermats crawling everywhere - through the ducts, between the floors, inside your goddamn armour even. Zemler's unit had suffered heavy losses, and it

was true the squad had lost control of the situation, but no one had intended the hostages to die.

He still had the nightmares. Woke up sweating ice, staring at the blank silver face with two black holes for eyes. And the more he stared the more he could see the eyes behind the holes. His eyes.

Moslei stood up and crossed over to the computer controls in his office. The best way of dealing with anything is to keep busy - he had learned that on Mars. He wiped the back of his glove across his face out of habit and immediately regretted it as a thick, sticky string of flesh came away from his lips. The curse of Janus Prime.

'Sergeant,' said a voice over the intercom.

Moslei wiped his glove and pushed the comm switch. 'What is it,Varko?'

"Thought you ought to know, Sarge: the captain's asked to see the prisoners.'

Oh hell, thought Moslei. 'When?'

"They're on their way now.'

'Right.' Moslei thought furiously for several seconds. He hadn't expected this. He had presumed that any interrogation of the Mendans would fall to him. Why did Zemler want to see them? What was the mad bastard up to now?

'Who's taking them?' he asked eventually, because he knew Zemler never left his inner sanctum now. The men called it that -the control hub at the centre of the dome.

Varko said,'I think it's Nwakanma.'

That figured - Nwakanma was one of Zemler's current favourites.'All right, Varko. Keep me posted.'

For a moment Moslei considered thanking him for the information but thought better of it. He switched off the intercom and sat back. There was nothing he could do about it now, but he might start his own investigation early. He was certain that the blonde girl wasn't one of the Mendan colonists; in which case he wanted to know exactly where she'd

come from.

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Vigo was in a bad way, but Sam was able to get him on his feet again. He hung on to her, which she didn't mind, but the fingers of his left hand were digging into her wounded shoulder. The avalanche of pain made her gag.

'Sorry,' he whispered, shifting his grip slightly. 'I'll be OK in a moment.'

'Take your time,' advised Sam.

'Don't listen to her,' said the guard, who Sam now saw had the name NWAKANMA stencilled on the sleeve of his spacesuit. He walked back down the passageway towards them, boots clanking. 'Captain Zemler wants to see you now. That means now, as in N-O-W

'Gosh,' Sam said. 'You can spell and hold a gun.'

The back-handed blow with which he replied was not all that powerful; it was the metallic components of his spacesuit glove that hurt. Sam's cheek stung, but not as much as her shoulder.

Vigo jumped the guard. Sam realised he must have been faking how weak he was, in order to take the man by surprise. Perhaps her distraction was just what he had been waiting for.

It was over almost before it had started, however. The guard's rifle cracked against Vigo's skull and he dropped to the floor, curling up with the pain. Either he really had been as weak as he appeared after all, or else the guard hadn't been that surprised. Nwakanma saw the opportunity to emphasise his advantage by slamming the rifle into the back of Vigo's neck with sickening force.

'Stop it, you moron,' shouted Sam.'You'll kill him!'

She knelt down, shielding him from further blows. He was panting heavily, and Sam could see blood dribbling out of the raw skin on his head. She felt his hands grabbing hold of her arms and squeezing hard.

Nwakanma said, 'Captain Zemler said he wanted to see you both. He didn't specify alive or dead. Move it, girl.'

He pushed the toe of his boot into her backside, propelling her towards a steel double door at the end of the passage. Vigo crawled after her, perhaps scared of another rifle butt to the head. The door parted with a sigh, revealing nothing but blackness. Together they went through on their knees.

Nwakanma stayed well back, covering the entrance to the inner sanctum with his gun. He wasn't certain whether he was covering his prisoners or scared of Gustav Zemler corning out. He didn't relax until the double door hissed shut.

With nothing to see, Sam's mind automatically concentrated on what she could feel and hear. As soon as the doors closed behind her Sam felt her pulse quicken, and a cold veil of sweat cover her forehead.

Gradually she realised that it was not completely dark; the contrast with the light from the corridor outside only made it seem so. Initially she could hear only the static hum of electronic machinery, but soon she could make out the telltale points of light which she took to be the standby LEDs of computer stations.

She sat still, not daring to move, not until she had some bearings. She could feel the heat of Vigo's body close by, and hear his ragged breath. Gradually her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom and she was able to see that some light was coming from an area of the floor ahead of them. As she looked it became brighter, like the dial of a luminous watch face. It was circular in shape, about four or five metres across. She edged towards it and found that the light was coming from somewhere beneath the metal floor: the grating cut the light into small squares of pale blue, which made gridlike patterns across their faces.

Ahead of her was a well or indentation, in the centre of which stood a tall wide cylinder made of some metallic blue material. Sharp edges cut into the surface reflected the light at angles around the room.

Sam and Vigo were kneeling on a walkway which circled the well, and Sam could see the glowing sand of Janus Prime around the edge of the cylinder's base. It was as if this room, and therefore the entire base dome, had been erected around it. She wondered why it could be so important. It didn't look like it belonged here at all

She started to stand.

'Stay on your knees.'

The voice which came from the shadows on the far side of the chamber sounded like it was gargling custard. She sank back down on the grating, telling herself that she was ill and wounded and needed to rest.

'Do not move again unless I tell you to,' said the voice. 'Do not speak unless I tell you to.'

'Gustav Zemler,' muttered Sam.

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'What did you say it was?' asked Vikto, his eyes narrowed into suspicious slits.

'Superdense metal polymer,'said the Doctor.'At least, that's what it's made from.'

They were standing in front of the tall blue column on Menda, speculating upon its origin and use.

'I still say its some kind of plastic or resin-based substance,' said Vikto.

His colleague, Unrin, was just as adamant that it was metal.

'It does not respond to any of our tests like any kind of plastic might.'

'Does that have to mean it's metal?'Vikto responded testily.

'Evidently it is not wood.'

'If it is a superdense metal polymer,' said the Doctor as he walked slowly around the column, totally ignoring the two scientists, 'then whoever built it must have been very advanced. It's not an easy medium to work with.'

Vikto and Unrin glared at him. They had been given the task of investigating the column by Kleiner himself, shortly after the Link had been discovered by the Mendan colonists. They were not very happy that this strangely dressed 'Doctor' had been drafted in to 'help out'. He was, apparently, to bring a fresh approach to the work and provide useful insights based on his experience of alien artefacts and ancient

civilisations.

'Ancient being a relative term, of course,' he had told them, but Vikto and Unrin weren't fooled by this blatant bamboozling. Any fool could see the man was a charlatan.

They watched him now as he completed his circuit of the pillar and then reached out to touch it, gently placing his fingertips on the burnished blue surface. Then he rested his forehead against the column and shut his eyes.

'I say, are you all right?' asked Vikto.

'Fine, thanks,' said the Doctor, and then simply stood there, immobile, almost as if he had fallen asleep.

Unrin was unable to contain his puzzlement. 'What are you doing?'

'Trying to communicate with it,' replied the Doctor without opening his eyes. A slight frown had appeared on his forehead as he concentrated. "There are no visible controls for manual operation, so it might respond to thought waves.'

'Are you trying to tell us it's telepathic?'

The Doctor opened one eye.'Vikto, isn't it?'

'Er - yes.'

'And Unrin?' the Doctor looked at the other scientist.

'How did you know that?' asked Unrin, who was certain they had not been formally introduced when the Doctor had arrived. In fact it was one of the things that he had intended to bring up at the next Science Council committee meeting.

'I read your minds,' the Doctor said, straightening up.

Consternation creased Vikto's face.'So you're telepathic?'

'No no no. At least, not usually. Not to that extent.' The Doctor patted the side of the column.'This thing must be broadcasting on submental wavelengths for me to be able to pick up your thoughts like that. It's

acting like a radio transmitter for alpha waves.'

'Alpha waves?'

'Yes, on or around two hundred and eighty-four point nine nine seven nine micropars I would think.' Vikto and Unrin looked blankly at him. 'Which means I should be able to establish some kind of basic contact at least...' The Doctor pressed his head against the column again, his brow furrowing once more.

'Mmph; he said, and then stepped back.

Vikto and Unrin glanced at each other.

The Doctor, too, looked nonplussed. 'It's odd, but there seems to be some kind of frequency modulation blocking my thought waves. Almost as if it were deliberately avoiding contact. Perhaps it's some kind of anti-handling feature - an automatic protection against the wrong kind of thoughts.' He scratched his head and then fixed the two scientists with a piercing stare. 'YouVe tried bombarding it with short-wave submeson rays, I take it?'

Both scientists shook their heads.

'We don't have that kind of equipment here,' said Vikto.

'Mostly it's just tractors and things,' added Unrin, apparently with no trace of irony.

'Yes, yes, of course.' The Doctor fished in his coat pocket and pulled out a small red electronic device. 'This is a sub-etheric beam locator, but it can be modified to emit submeson rays of varying frequencies...' He was fiddling with the instrument as he spoke. Finally he held it close to the column and a series of sharp twanging bleeps echoed around the room.

'Mmm, as I thought,' he muttered, switching the device off. 'Completely immune to submeson bombardment - there's no ion-charged emission at any rate. Not even a trace of reverse co-modulation in the lower wave bands. Quite magnificent. It's perfectly tuned.'

'But what is it?'

'I don't know. But it's not the controls for a matter transmitter, that's for

sure.'

'How can you say that?'

For a moment the Doctor considered being facetious, but the look of genuine confusion on the scientists' faces made him stop. Instead he said,'Gentlemen, please... take my word for it.'

'Then if it is not a transmat,' said Unrin with caustic patience, 'what it is? An interplanetary catapult?'

Vikto actually sniggered but the Doctor just nodded. 'Yes yes yes, something like that - put very simply of course.' He pocketed the beam locator and looked at Unrin.' Very simply.'

'Well, Doctor, what've you found?'

They all turned to see Kleiner come into the room, followed by Julya. Kleiner walked up to the column and stood before it, legs slightly apart, hands clasped behind his back.

'I've found how terribly useless tractors are as tools of analysis.' Smiling sweetly at the two scientists, he continued. 'I've had a closer look at the device but I still can't determine its exact function. Its more like something I'd expect of a mass conversion system.'' He hooked a finger in his mouth. 'But that doesn't make sense.'

'You can say that again,' Kleiner said, and then quickly raised a hand to dissuade the Doctor from doing just that. 'Can you operate it?'

'Not at the moment. I need the right kind of equipment to access the controls.'

'Can we help?'

'That's very kind of you, but I don't think prodding it with a pitchfork is going to be any use. What I really need is -'

'- to go back to Janus Prime,' finished Kleiner. 'Sorry.'

The Doctor grimaced and folded his arms. Julya knew he was still thinking of Sam.

'Could this thing actually control the direction of the transmat - sorry, the whatever it is?' she asked.

'So that it could be used to travel somewhere other than Janus Prime?' the Doctor rubbed his chin. 'Unlikely. As I said, I think we're missing the point entirely. It's not a matter transmission device per se, but...'

He started to pace up and down, running his fingers through his mane of hair. "There's something I'm overlooking. Something important. Something... so big and obvious that I can't see it.'

He walked back over to one of the scientists' computer consoles and punched up a data display. The screen filled with information. Julya watched as his long fingers played expertly over the keyboard and his keen eyes absorbed the information. He stroked his lip as he read, scrolling through the pages at a rate he couldn't possibly keep up with. It was already past midnight, and she felt fit to drop, but the Doctor looked as if he'd just woken up.

'We've run every kind of analysis we can think of,' Vikto was saying. 'Or at least that we're capable of. It defies all our attempts to penetrate it, X-ray it, dismantle it or operate it.'

'That's because none of your tools are compatible with the alien technology used to create it,' the Doctor told him. He slapped the top of the computer monitor petulantly. 'Nothing! Just reams of conjecture.'

'Doctor,' said Julya. 'It's late, you must be tired. Why don't we go back to Newtown and get some rest?'

The Doctor took out his fob watch and flipped it open. 'Late? There is no such thing as day or night on Janus Prime, Julya. You can go to bed if you like, but I - wait! Wait wait wait...' He was looking at her with suddenly wide-open eyes. 'What?' 'Are you scared of spiders?' he asked. 'What?' she said again.

'Spiders!' he exclaimed.'I'm not scared of them myself, although I did come across a pretty unfriendly bunch on Metebelis 3. They were bigger than your average spider, but they were still small compared to the ones on Janus Prime.'

Kleiner was confused. 'What about them?'

'Exactly. What about them? That's what we've been missing, don't you see?' He looked from one to the other, full of excitement. "The spiders aren't suffering from any radiation sickness. They're fit and healthy, because Janus Prime is their natural environment.'

'So?'

'Julya, you told me that the Link was first discovered when one of the colonists saw a Janusian spider appear here on Menda,yes?'

"That's right.'

'And Lunder said Gustav Zemler deliberately sent cybernetically augmented spiders through the Link, to attack the colony.'

'Spidroids, yes.'

The Doctor clapped the other hand to his forehead.'Why didn't I think of it before? Now, are you sure none of those spiders showed any ill effects?'

Kleiner shrugged.'None that we're aware of. We destroyed the first one... But then we realised they weren't a threat - no more than animals - and we didn't see much more of them until Zemler's spidroids came through.'

'The autopsies showed nothing untoward,' confirmed Unrin.

The Doctor whirled around. 'Autopsies?'

'Yes,' Vikto said. 'We undertook examinations of all the dead spider creatures, naturally.'

'Naturally.' An intense look came into the Doctor's eyes.'I don't suppose you've still got any of the bodies?'

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Lunder was leaning against the observation window overlooking the Link chamber. The gentle ripple in the air that represented the Link itself reminded him of tiny waves in a shallow pond. For a moment the sight transported him back to the age of six when he had sat on a beach on Rho Priapus, the planet his mother had been deported to following the Dalek invasion. He had enjoyed watching the water then, with the sun on

his back and the sand between his toes, watching the fleeting patterns drawn on its glistening surface by each stray breeze.

All that was a lifetime ago, however. More than a lifetime. It wasn't very long after that when his mother had been forced to sell him into the military. Lunder had never seen her again - not even when he had returned to Rho Priapus twenty years later with the Space Marines to free it from a Selachian invasion force. His sergeant had offered him half a day's compassionate leave to search for her, but he had refused it. There had been a lot more than twenty years in the armed forces between him and his mother then.

Army life had suited Lunder, eventually. At first it had been a struggle. Most of the other recruits had been orphans who had already been fighting for survival on Earth or some other colony world long before joining the marines. They were tough and cruel before they had lost their milk teeth, whereas Lunder, with his softly tanned skin and wide-eyed innocence, was not. As protection he immersed himself in the training, and grew to love the distracting physical vigour of warfare. At fifteen he was the best shot in his platoon; at sixteen he was turning that skill against alien aggressors on a dozen frontier worlds.

The specialist unit to which Lunder was eventually assigned was commanded by a young and respected captain called Gustav Zemler. Zemler's unit saw continuous action in a number of battle zones for five years before it met its nemesis on Titan 317. The memory of that particular operation still made Lunder feel sick, but not as sick as the memory of how Zemler and his men had been treated by Earth Control afterwards.

Unarmed civilianshad died on Titan 317 - that much was true - but not a single official at the court martial had been interested in anything other than that body count. The trial computer came out with a guilty verdict and Earth Control succeeded where the Cybermen, the Selachians, the Veltrochni and sundry other BEMs had failed - they destroyed Zemler's Special Forces unit.

Disgusted, the unit stuck by Zemler to the last man. They agreed^ that the best thing they could do now was to get as far away from Earth as possible until the heat cooled off. They sold their services as independent military advisers to a colony ship bound for the Janus system on the outer edge of Earth space.

Looking back now, Lunder could trace the origins of his current predicament to that decision in more ways than one. Freed of even the nominal control of the Space Marines, the soldiers lost discipline. Zemler blamed it on high spirits, but when those high spirits culminated in an assault on a colonist's daughter, a fight broke out and Lunder did the unthinkable: he turned on his fellow trooper, killing him with a single blow to the throat. He'd crossed the line from friend to enemy. Zemler and his men went their way, and Lunder went his.

Lunder switched off the lights in the Link chamber and watched his reflection in the darkened glass for several moments. He had lived too long with a gun in his hand to worry about anything other than himself, but the split from Zemler and his former comrades had been difficult to handle. Perhaps it had been fate, then, that hospitalised him after the crash of the colony ship and prevented him from going to Janus Prime with the rest of Zemler's unit.

Lunder shivered.

Looking at the link now, he could still see the two men Zemler had sent back the first time, the ones who weren't wearing spacesuits. He'd known both of them well, had called them friends for a time, and the speed with which they had just melted into a single mound of slime had appalled him more than anything else he had seen. At that point Lunder had still been struggling to call them the enemy.

That could've been me, he thought. 1 could have gone with them to Janus Prime.

Unconsciously he had reached out for Julya and held her to him, more for his own support than to comfort her. The moment hadn't lasted. He had broken the contact awkwardly, and, as if terrified of wasting his good health, immersed himself in a rigorous programme of exercise to overcome the injury he had sustained in the crash.

Julya helped him. She had been his nurse in hospital, she understood him better than any of the others. Lunder was something of a hero to the colonists after the brawl on the ship, but Julya only ever saw him as a man who had lost all his friends in one moment of bitter fury. When the first of the spidroids came through the Link, it was almost a relief. They were a real threat, monsters, something he couldfight . It also crystallised his position with the colonists and freed him of the feeling that his real family were stuck, helpless and dying, on a radioactive

planet on the far side of the sun.

He actually enjoyed helping the Mendans, as they liked to call themselves now, to fight back. He had met with the council, the nominated leaders of the community, who had all bored him witless with the exception of a rugged old farmer called Kleiner who had, apparently, seen military service in the Alphan Kundekka conflict of 2198. Lunder had wanned to him instantly. Kleiner was one of the more proactive colony leaders and fully prepared to back almost any strategy Lunder formulated, including the training and use of volunteers as commandos in lightning recon missions to Janus Prime. In the event there had not been many volunteers - those that had come to Menda had done so with the intention of living off the land and starting afresh, not taking up arms and fighting. Only two people proved any real use: Julya and a wiry young mechanic called Vigo.

Vigo was a quick learner and had become a good friend, a man who was content to do exactly what he had to in order to get the job done. And he made Lunder laugh - not many people could do that.

Initially, stupidly, Lunder had thought that Julya volunteered merely so that she could be with him again, but he had been mistaken. What he had dismissed as a crush turned out to be a cool determination to protect the colony at all costs, and even now Lunder still recognised in Julya a selfless dedication to the colony that he knew was lacking in him. He was a fighter, a soldier. He was just doing what came naturally.

He did grow close to Julya during her period of intense training; even now he could recall the warmth and scent of her hair against his jaw as he put his arms around her to correct her grip on the ripgun. And she had responded to the slightest pressure of his hips against the small of her back by narrowing her eyes, targeting a nearby tree, and blowing it into a ragged bundle of matchwood.

Lunder smiled briefly at the memory, and wished - not for the first time - he could bring back the past.

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'You. Mendan. What's your name?'

Sam peered into the shadows on the far side of the room, but she couldn't see anything clearly, not with the glow from the well at the

centre.

'Sam. But you can call me Miss Jones if you like.'

A snort.'Not you, girl. The other one.'

Sam looked down at Vigo. He was lying curled up in a foetal ball, his breath quick and shallow. Even in the pale-green light she could tell he was ill.

'His name's Vigo.'

'I asked him, girl. Not you.' The dim figure raised a hand, and Sam could see that it was sheathed in a spacesuit glove. 'Look up at me.'

'He can't. He's ill.'

'I know he is. We all are, here. But we have to ignore the pain. Carry out our duties.'

'He needs treatment.'

A guttural laugh, the sort of noise a blocked sewer might make when suddenly cleared.'It's too late for that, girl.'

Sam was getting fed up.'I have a name! Don't call me "girl"!'

'I'll call you what I like. Come here, girl, let's have a look at you.'

Know thine enemy. There was something dreadful about that voice, something dreadful but irresistible. Sam crawled forward, towards him.

He was sitting in a large chair, high-backed, wearing the full spacesuit and helmet. She couldn't see through the visor.

'You're not bad-looking, girl. Good skin. Features.'

Sam just shook her head. She was feeling faint, she could see spots flashing in her vision. She was kneeling by the edge of the well, the groundlight reflecting off the sweat on her face. The thought of all that radiation eating through her, changing her, damaging her, made her want to puke. Christ, Doctor...

'Lay a finger on her, and I swear...' Vigo had crawled forward on his hands and knees, with a look of grim purpose in his bloodshot eyes. Sam saw long strands of flesh sticking to the grating beneath his hands as if he had put his fingers in a piece of discarded chewing gum.

Zemler laughed again.'Come on, Mendan. Let's see what you're made of. You're dying anyway. WhatVe you got to lose?'

'You've been like a poison to my people ever since we met you,' Vigo panted. He was using every last ounce of strength just to speak. The fact that he was trying to protect her made Sam want to weep. She crawled across to him, putting an arm round his shoulders.

'Why can't you just die?' muttered Vigo, his head bowed.

The space helmet bobbed as if Zemler was considering the question. 'Because you don't die on Janus Prime. You just rot, and carry on rotting. The only thing which does the trick is a laser bolt, and don't think there's any one of us here who hasn't thought of that.'

Sam said, "There has to be some kind of cure, another way.

'Does there? Why?' Zemler leaned forward slightly. 'It doesn't matter any more. None of us are going to give in now. Least of all to a bunch of farmers with nothing in their guts but soil.'

Vigo moved suddenly, spurred on to the point of suicide perhaps, unable to stand the thought of living like this. Sam saw it happen, and could see what was going to happen. She guessed the gun would be in Zemler's hand even before she registered it, and blinked in the bright flash of its discharge. Vigo spun around, having taken barely three steps towards Zemler, and crashed to the floor. Sam dived across to him, helped him to his knees, but he just leaned against her, heavily, his breath rasping in her ear.

'Sorry.'

Sam felt his last word on the skin of her cheek, then he sank in her arms, really sank, as if all the air had been let out of his body. She hugged him to her, not wanting to let go of him and see him slither to the floor. If she held on to him, maybe he would be alive for just a little longer.

As she pulled him to her, she realised that he was changing shape. It was like holding a bag of porridge, there was no substance to his body, no hardness, no muscle, bone, nothing. Then she became aware of the hot wetness soaking through her tracksuit legs. Oh, please, don't let it be blood.

She let him go. The clothes he had worn crumpled and fell away, leaving a river of glistening slime in her lap. What was left of his body slid on to the floor. His flesh had melted away from the bones. She could see his ribs sticking out through the cloth of his combat tunic, but even they were bending like hot plastic, dissolving, liquefying, seeping through the gaps in the metal grating and plopping to the ground below.

Sam tore her gaze away and looked up at Zemler, who was leaning further forward so that he might have a better view. 'What... what happened?'

'What happens to all of us who die here,' said Gustav Zemler. 'While there is life, the body decays slowly. In death, there is nothing to hold it together. Take a good, long look at it, girl. Because that's what's going to happen to you, too.'

She looked at him then. He had pulled open the visor on his helmet and was looking at her. The eyes were like fried eggs swimming in fat. The nose was just a bubbling hole over a set of uneven teeth, grinning like those of a skull. Saliva hung from the chin, along with a web of flesh which had stuck to the collar of his spacesuit.

'Hello, my pretty,' he laughed.

Chapter Eight
Runner

Lunder ran his security ID through the reader slot and the armoury door hissed open. He had full access to every level of the Link site, along with Kleiner, and this room was Lunder's favourite.

It was not a large room, but it had racks along each wall holding a small but useful number of weapons. There were half a dozen laser pistols, a rifle, and even a couple of plasma slicers, although one of them had a faulty energy feed. The guns had all been left behind by Zemler's squad when they had travelled to Janus Prime. Each man had taken as many items of weaponry and ammunition as he could safely carry - heavy emphasis had been placed on being 'prepared for anything' as Zemler put it. The intention had been to survey the immediate arrival area of the planet, secure a bridgehead, and then let loose the robotic dome drones to construct a base.

He remembered his mixed feelings when they'd realised the soldiers could never return to live on Menda away from the radiation that preserved them while it destroyed them - at least, not without spending the rest of their lives in sealed spacesuits. Lunder suppressed a grimace at the memory of the two troopers he saw - and knew well - melting like hot wax before his eyes. With all those weapons, Lunder was surprised Zemler had never attempted to take the Mendan base, not even out of some warped sense of revenge. Perhaps he was still hoping to find some sort of cure, or perhaps he realised his men were in no shape to take on a thousand colonists. In any case, the armoury contained plenty of surplus weapons and armaments to be used on Menda in defence.

Or to take the fight to Janus Prime.

Lunder walked into the armoury and picked up a laser pistol. It was a Stam 3-7: compact, lightweight, with a 900-shot charge and selective rate of fire. It could shoot a single laser bolt, a burst of five, or continuous fire at the turn of a dial. This was Lunder's own personal weapon; it had a number of unique scratches on the discharge barrel and his initial cut into the polyrubber grip with his boot knife.

He powered up the pistol's chip and let the weapon scan itself for any faults. He wasn't surprised when the tiny computer's telltales lit to indicate that the capacitor was functioning at well below optimum. The

gun was not new, after all, and had seen a lot of action. He didn't mind - he knew this gun inside out. And there had been many a time when the heat of the pistol's grip in his hand had been the only source of comfort available. He remembered telling Vigo that many months ago during one of their training sessions on the shooting range set up downstairs. Vigo had laughed at Lunder's seriousness, mocked him for being able to draw comfort from a gun. And Lunder had smiled back, self-conscious, on the verge of embarrassment. He had dispelled that moment of weakness by aiming down the range and cutting the target dummy in half with a five-bolter. Vigo had still carried on grinning like a maniac.

Thinking of Vigo made Lunder smile again, but it was the smile of a wolf. He switched off the diagnostic program and let the gun cycle through the remainder of its automatic pre-use checks. Everything else showed up green, as expected.

Lunder bolstered the pistol and then picked up a ripgun. This had been developed to deal specifically with the problem posed by the laser-deflective armour built into the military spacesuits worn by Zemler's men. It fired old-fashioned projectiles, flechettes which could penetrate the flexible carbidium outer layer and then detonate inside the suit. It turned the wearer of the spacesuit into so much mincemeat but Lunder reckoned Zemler's men were well on the way to that already. The ripgun was a handy way of putting the poor bastards out of their misery as far as he was concerned.

The gun took a front-loaded magazine of fifty rounds. Lunder picked up one magazine and slotted it into the ammo pouches of his combat vest and left the armoury.

***

On Janus Prime, Moslei was sitting at a bank of computers, trying to bring the rogue spidroid back on line. There was nothing he could do now that the Mendan and the girl, Sam Jones, were in with Zemler - except wait. And the best way to pass the time was to do something useful.

The spidroid had turned rogue during the fight in the ruins, probably as a result of sabotage, and Moslei wanted to get it back up and running fast. There was a danger that some of the native spiders could attack the damaged spidroid and kill it unless he brought it back to full function. Even if it was not possible to bring it back on line, the data it had

assimilated just prior to its malfunction could provide a useful clue as to the identity and origin of the girl Gustav Zemler was currently entertaining.

After a few minutes' work he realised he was getting nowhere. The wretched thing simply wasn't responding. Angrily he flicked the control that would remotely detonate the small explosive charges lodged in the creature's neck and kill it. Then they might be able to salvage the cybernetic parts later.

He downloaded the information that had been automatically transmitted back to the base dome in digitised form by the spidroid in question. This provided a complete breakdown of every data element secured from the spidroid up to the moment of its original malfunction.

There was a lot of general stuff which Moslei had the computers sift for him. As an old-fashioned soldier and a human being, he was primarily interested in the cyborg's visual recording. The final images captured by the photoreceptor cameras fitted in place of its natural eyes flashed up on the monitor before him.

He saw the ruins, and the escaping Mendan woman who had actually evaded capture. The spidroid appeared to have followed her into a blind alley. The woman raced down the passage and came to a stop in front of a -

Moslei paused the recording and studied the image, running an intensifier program through the monitor. There appeared to be some sort of large blue box standing near the end of the alley, partially blocking the way. He released the pause, and watched in fascination as a door in the box opened and two people emerged.

The first was the blonde girl, Sam Jones.

The second figure was taller, male, with long hair.

Moslei watched the scene unfold, noted the disappearance of the Mendan fugitive with the girl, and then studied the close-up of the long-haired man. Moslei frowned. He appeared to be talking to the spidroid - and the spidroid's biological pattern-recognition program had crashed at this point. Moslei checked the cyborg's computer analysis of the man's physiological make-up, antrhad to stop himself rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

The man was an alien, or at the very least a mutant. But Moslei was certain that Sam Jones was human. Nothing about this made sense. By rights he should inform Zemler immediately of this development, but something stopped him.

He rewound the video footage until the spidroid's view of the tall blue box appeared on the screen and peered carefully at the top, where there appeared to be a sign or notice written in English. The letters were illuminated white on black.

'Police box,' he read out quietly. He sat back. Then he hit the intercom switch. 'Varko, get up here now.'

'Sarge.' Moslei instantly detected the note of urgency in his subordinate's reply.'There's something up.'

Irritated, Moslei barked,'What?'

"The captain, sir. Something's happened with the prisoners. Nwakanma says he heard a shot.'

***

As a medical nurse cross-trained in basic pathology, Julya had hoped that she could finally be of some use to the Doctor. They were in the link site mortuary, where a large area of the floor had been cleared in order to make way for the body of a giant spider.

The Doctor was kneeling beside the creature, absorbed in the detail shown up by the large antiquated magnifying glass he had produced from one of his pockets. As if you needed a magnifying glass to look at

one of these things, she thought ruefully. It was at least six metres from leg tip to leg tip, although there were only five of the legs actually left intact following the creature's destruction several months ago by the Mendans.

Perhaps pathology wasn't quite the right field, Julya reflected. Maybe someone qualified in mechanical engineering would be more useful, given the large number of cybernetic implants that were visible in the spider's innards.

'Most of the augmentation is in the brain area,' muttered the Doctor, peering more closely at the spider's head section, where a laser bolt had blown away a plate-sized area of the skull.'There's extensive cybernetic reconfiguration of the major sensory organs too. It's pretty basic stuff, but reliable.'

It was cold in here. The mortuary was deep underground and the spider corpse had been removed from a refrigeration unit originally used to store perishable grain during the voyage from Earth. As chief scientists for the colony, Vikto and Unrin had also dealt with the autopsies of all the spidroids sent through the Link by Gustav Zemler, and had dutifully handed the Doctor their somewhat inconclusive report on this one.

He had discarded the report with barely a glance and set about examining the remains himself. The low temperature didn't seem to bother him; he had removed his long velvet coat and rolled up his shirtsleeves to work.

'Hmm, this is interesting,' she heard the Doctor say, his long nose practically touching the rough waxy surface of the creature's head - or what was left of it. Julya couldn't help feeling slightly queasy at the sight of electronic components lodged inside what must be brain tissue and cartilage.

'What's interesting?' she asked.

He looked up at her, keeping the magnifying glass in front of his face so that one eye appeared huge. 'Some of the cybernetic linkages in the cephalothorax are still functional,' he told her. 'Watch this.'

He thrust the fingers of one hand into the corpse's brain cavity and twisted something. Instantly three of the spidroid's legs gave a series of convulsive jerks. Julya reeled back in horror, covering her mouth.

The Doctor shook his head, sadly. "They took away your dignity as well as your self-control.'Julya sat back and caught her breath, wondering how anyone could feel sorry for such a thing.

'Can we concentrate on the matter at hand, please, Doctor?' asked Kleiner with deliberate emphasis. He was leaning against one of the empty autopsy tables, arms folded.

'But I am concentrating,' argued the Doctor as he stood up. 'Only not in quite the right way, it seems.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Alpha waves.'

'Doctor, you're not making any sense.'

The Doctor harrumphed and began pacing rapidly back and forth as he spoke.'This... creature... I suppose we really ought to call it a Janusian rather than a giant spider, don't you?'

'Whatever.'

'Well, this Janusian has a surprisingly well-developed brain cavity for such an apparently unsophisticated life form. It's almost as if its brain was far too large for the purposes it has been put to. A little like the human brain, if you like, only more so.'

'I don't understand.'

'He means we only use about twenty or thirty per cent of our own brains,'Julya realised.'Isn't that right?'

'Yes,' said the Doctor, 'and no. The unused part of the human brain tends to just sit there waiting for something to do. The unused area of the Janusian brain has simply atrophied. The capacity was there, once, but it isn't any more.'

'Any ideas why?'

'No, but I think it's an evolutionary development. What's particularly interesting is the part which has atrophied, here...' The Doctor poked a

dark area of the Janusian's brain cavity with a pencil. 'It's the gland popularly believed to be responsible for generating alpha waves in most sentient organic species.'

'And these alpha waves are...?'

"The kind responsible for telepathic communication.'

'The spiders - I mean the Janusians - are telepathic?'

'Not any more. But they might have had the ability once. It would explain the link control system after all.'

'It would?' Kleiner sounded doubtful.

The Doctor continued to speak quickly and clearly, evidently excited by his discovery:

'Yes, of course. There's no physical way of accessing the control system. It's operated by an alpha-wave interface. Bonded metal polymers are particularly suited to that kind of thing. I did try establishing some kind of interface myself, but without success.'

'Are you saying that these Janusian things built the Link?' asked Julya.

'No.'

'Then whatare you saying, for heaven's sake?' Kleiner was clearly losing patience, but the Doctor seemed not to notice or care. He had knelt down again to gently rest a hand on the spidroid's thick carapace.

'I'm saying it's interesting, that's all, in the same way that it's interesting that the ruins on Janus Prime show evidence of buildings created to accommodate a species of this size and shape.'

'And what about the radiation?'

'What?'

'The radiation the Janusians are immune to.'

'Oh, that. Yes, that also is interesting. I haven't the facilities here for a molecular or even chemical examination, but I'd hazard a guess that the

Janusians developed a natural biologicatresistance to the pathogenic damage caused by the radiation. Probably at around the time they lost the ability to transmit alpha waves. To be honest, I really think the answers are on Janus Prime. Please let me go there.'

Kleiner and Julya exchanged a look.

'What is it?' demanded the Doctor.

'We weren't going to tell you this,' said Kleiner,'as it's strictly a security matter. But Julya's team were sent to Janus Prime on a mission to find out exactly what Gustav Zemler is currently up to.'

'It's been pretty quiet for a while, you see,'Julya explained.'But we're convinced he's up to something.'

The Doctor looked from one to the other. 'And is he?' he asked in a theatrical whisper.

'Before we lost contact with Vigo, he told us Zemler and his men were experimenting on the spider creatures - I mean the Janusians. Not just cybernetically, but in other ways. We don't know for sure, but we think he was dissecting them.'

'Do you think Zemler might have discovered something about the Janusians' ancestry? Something he could use to operate the Link controls, perhaps? Or even a cure for the radiation sickness?' The Doctor was thinking furiously. 'We really must go back to Janus Prime. I have equipment there which could help us find the answers.'

'Equipment?'

'My TARDIS.'

Kleiner was about to refuse point-blank when the door crashed open and Lunder came in brandishing a ripgun. He was fully kitted up.

'We don't know what happened to Vigo,' he said.'I'm going back there to find out.'

'Excellent,' said the Doctor, walking straight past him. 'You can come with me.'

***

Sam woke up on a soft bed, slightly woozy but otherwise relaxed.

Then she remembered what had happened: Vigo, his death, the mess. Gustav Zemler. His face leering at her like the skull of a rotten cadaver -

She sat upright, throwing off nonexistent bedclothes. But she wasn't in bed. She was lying in a reclined seat, padded but hard, in front of a bank of controls.

'Whoa, sit back.' The hand gently pressed her back against the seat.'Fasten your lap strap if you want.'

Sam was sitting in the copilot's seat of an aircraft. She knew it was in flight, because she could feel the vibration of the ship's engines through her trainers. Ahead of her was a dark screen. No, it was a window: she could see through it, see the glowing sands of Janus Prime flowing by below. They must be flying over the surface, pretty low by the looks of it.

'Relax, you're safe,' said Varko. He was in the pilot's chair, hands on the flight controls. He was concentrating on guiding the ship, frowning slightly. His suit was glistening in the light of the cockpit controls.

Sam raised a hand to her aching head, and then stopped, wincing, as pain flamed in her shoulder.'What happened? What's going on?'

'You passed out in Zemler's inner sanctum.' Varko sounded casual.'Zemler wanted to entertain you again when you woke up, chucked you back in detention. We got you away from there.'

'Who's "we"?'

'Sergeant Moslei and I.We were... concerned.'

'You weren't concerned when you had me shot and thrown into a cell.' Sam's head was hurting, and so was her shoulder. The painkillerVigo had given her... when? Long ago enough to have worn off now. Gently she tried to move the shoulder joint, testing the limit of its pain, assessing how much she could move it. Somewhere in the back of her mind she was thinking about escape. The front of her mind was just confused.

'Would you accept we were just following orders?'

Sam couldn't think of anything to say to that. 'Where are you taking me?'

'Away from Zemler. He's insane.'

Sam let out a bitter laugh. "That's the least of his problems, isn't it?'

Varko concentrated on the controls of the ship without replying. Sam wondered if she had offended him; she supposed he must be suffering from the same condition and began to feel a little sorry for him.

And for herself.

'This radiation sickness,' she said with nettle-grasping directness. 'What're the first symptoms?'

Varko shrugged.'General feeling of ill health. Headache, nausea, that sort of thing.'

Yup, thought Sam. But then I might just have flu.

Varko glanced sideways at her. "Then there's pain. And stickiness.'

'Stickiness?'

'Yeah, your skin. It starts to dissolve. Sticks to things.'

'Right.' Sam carefully removed her hand from the armrest of her acceleration chair, heart thudding in her chest.

But no stickiness. Just clamminess, sweat.

She wiped the palm of her hand on the leg of her trousers - and only then realised that she was wearing a pair of baggy combat fatigues in a drab green colour. Her sports vest had also been replaced by a thicker, coarser one which chafed at the burn on her shoulder.

'Had to dump your own clothes,' Varko informed her. 'Your friend made quite a mess of them.'

Vigo. She shut her eyes tight and slapped down the image that had begun to form - re-form - in her mind's eye.

'So why are you doing this?'

'Like I said, Zemler's mad. The sergeant and I don't hold with a lot of what he says now.'

'So how come you're still with him?'

'There's nowhere else for us to go. If we leave this planet we die - straight away.'

Sam considered this, but couldn't imagine what it must be like to be stuck here. All she wanted now was to get off Janus Prime for ever, before it was too late.

'Where are you taking me?'

'Back to where you came from.'

'Come again?'

'The ruins.'

The ship began to bank to port and descend. Sam caught a glimpse of the tops of some broken buildings, dark angular shapes against a luminous background, flashing past. She looked out of the porthole to her left and watched the pattern of the ruined alien township unfold like a badly photocopied A-to-Z map without any road names.

Then they were past the ruins and coming in to land, the ship's retrorockets firing with a loud whine and throwing up clouds of glowing sapphire dust.

'We're about thirty kilometres from the base,' Varko informed her as he released the controls and unbuckled his straps. 'If I get back in time it could be half a day before they discover you've gone. Say ten hours.'

Sam climbed out of her seat and followed him through the cockpit door to the aft hold. She was alarmed to find her legs shaking as she walked, and resolved to pull herself together.

'Don't I get a map?' she asked as Varko bit the door-release control. A thick chunk of the bulkhead door suddenly split apart with a pressurised

hiss and the cold dark air of Janus Prime rushed in.

'You're on your own, now, Sam Jones.' He sounded genuinely sorry, and she wondered how his face looked behind the black visor.'But believe me, you're better off here than back at the base.'

Sam recalled - momentarily - the devastated features of Gustav Zemler and nodded in agreement. 'Thanks.'

Vigo just nodded.'Now go. Go!' He pushed her out of the airlock and she ran down the ramp, stumbling when she reached the ground. It didn't take long to regain her footing, however - if nothing else, Sam Jones could run. Three miles, every morning, without fail. Almost. She turned and headed for the ruins.

Because somewhere in there was the TARDIS, and if she could find it she would be safe. Once, the Doctor had told her that there was a spare key hidden above the P in the POLICE BOX sign over the doors. If she could get inside the TARDIS she would be safe from Gustav Zemler, his men, the spidroids, and, above all, the radiation.

Behind her the patrol ship blasted off, the scream of its engines painfully loud. She watched it rise into the black sky trailing vapour, and then turn and head back for the base. She resisted the ludicrous temptation to wave.

She turned back towards the ruins and ran.

***

Varko switched control of the patrol ship to the flight computer and sat back. After a few seconds' thought he activated the comlink to the base.

'How did it go?' asked Moslei the instant his disfigured face flickered on to the screen.

'Perfect,' said Varko.'She didn't suspect a thing. Ran like a rabbit the moment I let her out the hatch.'

Moslei nodded, clearly satisfied. "The tracer implant in her arm has a life expectancy of twenty hours, which gives her plenty of time to locate this police box thing and lead us right to it.'

'I've got a foot patrol on standby,' confirmed Varko. 'Any idea what the box is, Sarge?'

'Nope, but that girl came out of it, and ten gets you one that's how she got to Janus Prime.'

'From God knows where,' muttered Varko.

Moslei nodded. 'If it provides a way off this rock, then Zemler should really be interested.'

Chapter Nine
Spider Fight

The Janusian was wounded. It could not tell if it was a mortal wound, but it knew that if it did not die soon then it would be killed by another of its kind. The explosive charges had been incorrectly positioned, and the detonation by the humans' remote control had failed to sever its head from its body.

Now, thick black blood oozing from the ragged hole in its neck, its head dangling from strips of burned flesh and plastic, the creature staggered on, through the ruins, step by step, neither thinking nor caring where it was headed.

All that lay before it was the darkness of the horizon, and all that lay behind was an uneven river of blood.

***

Lunder stepped out of the Link first. It was getting easier now, and he was ready for the sickening lurch of consciousness which struck the moment he arrived. He compensated by dropping to one knee and quickly surveying the immediate area, ripgun levelled and ready.

Julya emerged a second later, followed by the Doctor, who took her gently by the elbow to steady her as the disorientation took effect. Once again, he didn't seem to notice it; in fact he appeared exhilarated by the journey. Or maybe it was the thought of finally finding Sam.

'Hmm, fifty-nine point seven two seconds,' he noted, inspecting the fob watch he was holding in his free hand.

'It feels like longer,' complained Julya, stretching awkwardly. She, like Lunder, was back in dark combat fatigues, a laser gun bolstered on her thigh and a number of ammunition packs clipped to black webbing belts. The Doctor, by contrast, had elected to stay in his distinctly civilian clothes. A light breeze ruffled the tangle of hair over his eyes as he looked around. They stood in the middle of a natural basin, the black disc and orange halo of the eclipsed red giant dominating the obsidian sky. Ahead of them were the edges of the ruined city, its jagged walls reflecting the dim glow of the sand.

Lunder stood up and moved his head around to relieve the tension in his neck.'Damn thing.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Like I said, the Link's not really intended purely as a means of travel...'

'Don't start that again.' Lunder started towards the ruins.'Come on.Vigo's still here somewhere and I want to find him.'

He didn't look back as he walked. The Doctor was irritating him already and he didn't trust himself with the ripgun. The Doctor had refused to bring a weapon - not even a lousy laser pistol, for God's sake. If the man had a death wish, he'd be happy enough to oblige him.

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Lunder spun, bringing the ripgun up level with his right eye and sighting down the thick barrel at the Doctor's face. The cool blue eyes regarded the muzzle of the gun for a long second before flicking up to meet Lunder's beady glare.

'Don't ever touch me again,' growled Lunder, his voice low, yet as harsh as broken glass under a boot. He did not shift the aim of his gun. At this range the flechette would punch right through the Doctor's skull.

'I've got a friend to find too,' replied the Doctor. 'And you can drop the gun - I'm not going to hurt you.'

Lunder took a step closer. The Doctor was a tall man but Lunder could look him directly in the eye. 'Let's get one thing straight, Doctor. You don't belong here. You don't even belong on Menda. If you jeopardise this mission even slightly, I won't hesitate to leave you or kill you, whichever is the easiest. Clear?'

He didn't wait for an answer: he just turned on his heel and marched off, blocking out the pain in his thigh so that he barely limped.

'I don't know what's got into him,' said Julya quietly.

'I imagine he's feeling guilty about Vigo,' surmised the Doctor. 'He finds it difficult to deal with that and his reaction is anger. And it's easy to be angry with me - I must represent everything he hates.'

'And does Lunder represent everything you hate?'

The Doctor looked at her, his expression unreadable. 'I hadn't thought of it like that.'

'And there was I thinking you were a doctor of psychology, as well.'

The Doctor grinned his easy grin. 'Does it show?'

'I never can tell. You seem to be an expert on everything.'

'Oh, not quite everything. I'm not an expert on this planet, for one thing.' He dropped to his haunches and picked up a handful of the strange sand, letting it run through his fingers in luminous streams.

'What was all that business with your pocket watch?'

'Ah, fifty-nine point seven two seconds. That's the time it took us to travel through the Link from Menda.'

'What about it?'

'You were right - it is a long time. Too long for a transmat beam.'

'Is that significant?'

The Doctor stood up, dusting his hands. 'Everything's significant. The distance, for instance. You say it's about two hundred and eighty million miles between Menda and Janus Prime. Well, it shouldn't be taking as long as -'

Further comment was interrupted by the sound of a gunshot from the ruins.

'Lunder!' cried Julya, sprinting in the direction the noise had come from. The Doctor ran after her.

***

Lunder had been so busy thinking about his altercation with the Doctor that he almost walked straight into the spidroid. He was grateful that no one had seen him make the mistake. The second he saw the creature crawling around the corner Lunder dived into cover, rolling and coming

up on one knee with his gun aimed instinctively.

Ordinarily even that would have been enough for a spidroid to see him and its cybernetic targeting computers to generate a lock; but this one was different. After a moment Lunder realised it was damaged, malfunctioning. It swayed from side to side, its head covered with congealed blood, pieces of plastic tubing and metal components dangling from a large exit wound in its neck. As he watched, the creature's legs quivered and then suddenly it charged towards him.

Lunder fired the ripgun without taking time to aim properly. The shot tore through the spidroid's flank but failed to explode. Hurriedly he reloaded and fired again, but the shot went wide, blowing chunks of masonry from the top edge of a wall some twenty metres beyond the monster.

Then it was on him.

The maw between four massive curved fangs opened wider, the mouth full of blood, and Lunder felt a blast of hot fetid breath across the exposed skin of his face.

Then the spidroid lurched to one side as something cannoned into it with a weighty crunch, and Lunder himself was thrown back against the wall behind with sudden and bruising force.

'Steady,' he heard the Doctor saying. 'Get your breath back.'

Lunder could feel the man's hands on his shoulders, helping him up. Angrily he staggered to his feet and looked back at the spidroid. When his vision returned to focus he saw another of the creatures on top of the injured spidroid, its jaws locked into the bloody remains of its neck.

'Come on,'hissed the Doctor,'while they're distracted.'

The spiders were rolling in the dirt, spitting acid, their long hairy legs scrabbling and tangling with each other. The second spider had a firm hold on the first and was using its weight to pin it down. This was not a cybernetically augmented creature but a pure-bred and native Janusian. Acid was bubbling around its pincered jaws, smoke coiling around its head.

The spidroid was weak but fought with the determination of every trapped animal. It could not bring its own fangs into play because of the

damage it had already sustained and the position of its assailant, but it struggled and spat until, in a fury, the second spider released its death grip. Possibly it was intending to adjust its angle of attack and deliver a killing bite, but the spidroid saw its chance and squirmed into a better position - back to the wall, wound lowermost - and bit back with a frenzied snarl. Blood sprayed into the air and the Janusian shrank back, stung, reassessing its opponent's strength.

For a second or two the monsters paused, breathing harshly, the first gurgling and coughing up gore.

Lunder realised he was backing away with the Doctor, and then became aware of Julya covering the brawling spiders with her ripgun. A piercing squeal signalled that the two giant arachnids had rejoined the fight, snapping and spurting acid at each other. The smell of roasting flesh filled the air. With a series of devastating bites the Janusian pressed home its attack and tore out the greater part of the spidroid's abdomen. Exposed to the cold night air, the creature's innards steamed as they slithered out of the ruptured flesh. Black blood filled the cavernous wound and the spidroid sank to the ground with a final, almost grateful-sounding, wheeze.

'I've never seen anything like that before,' panted Lunder. He was still winded from the impact with the wall.

'You might see something like it again,' remarked the Doctor anxiously.'I suspect that Janusian was attracted by the smell of the spidroid's blood. The noise of the fight could bring others, so we'd better move.'

'Too late.'

A Janusian had appeared from a side passage further down the road, its legs moving with deliberate caution. Like the spider currently sitting motionless over the body of the dead spidroid, it was not one of Zemler's cybernetic slaves. These were the wild spiders native to Janus Prime.

Julya levelled her ripgun but the Doctor stepped in front of her, blocking her view of the Janusian.

'Get out of the way, Doctor!'

'Don't shoot it...'

'Bugger that,' said Lunder, stepping to one side and shooting from the hip. The round caught the spider directly amidships and blew it in half.

'Oh well done,' snapped the Doctor. 'What a perfect solution! Why didn't I think of that?'

'It's one less problem.'

The Doctor glared angrily at him.'Apart from the fact that it was unarmed and not showing the slightest interest in us, that was a wild Janusian. We don't know how many others may be in the area... you might have just sparked a stampede, or worse.'

As he spoke, the first Janusians came. Some scuttled out of side roads and doorways; others crawled over the tops of broken-down walls. 'Wait,' the Doctor cautioned them hurriedly as Julya and Lunder started to move. 'When I say run...'

'Split up,' said Lunder, darting to the left.

'No,' called the Doctor,' stick together!'

'Look out!'Julya pushed him aside with the barrel of her ripgun and pulled the trigger The Doctor felt rather than heard the blast as it flash-burned past his head. He turned instinctively to see a giant spider explode ten metres behind him, shreds of flesh and broken legs flying high into the air.

'Come on!' Julya pulled him after her, running down a side passage as two Janusians fell on the ravaged carcass.

***

Lunder let loose a volley of shots at the oncoming spiders. The flechettes detonated with results that were as savage as they were lethal. Those Janusians that were not killed instantly crawled away and curled up to die in agony.

Lunder was grinning, his lips pulled back from his teeth in a rictus of effort as he ran, shooting, until he had emptied the ripgun's magazine. Then he dived behind a low stone wall to reload, the smell of burning meat and blood filling his nostrils.

***

Julya and the Doctor were running in the opposite direction. They ran blindly at first, until the Doctor suddenly skidded to a halt and forced Julya to run smack into him.

'Wait!' cried the Doctor.'Wait, wait, wait.'

'What is it?' Julya turned slowly, ripgun levelled, expecting trouble.

The Doctor, on the other hand, had licked a finger and was holding it up in the air as if testing the direction of a breeze.

"This way,' he said, grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her after him.

***

Sam felt like a laboratory mouse let loose in a maze. She found herself fully able to sympathise with any small rodent searching for a measly piece of cheese as its reward for wandering aimlessly around identical passages for hours on end.

She was almost on the verge of allowing herself to believe that the TARDIS was no longer in the ruins at all. Perhaps it had been taken, or eaten by one of the spiders.

Don't be ridiculous, she told herself. Just keep cool, keep looking, and it'll turn up. And keep listening out for the spiders. She had learned to recognise the moist clicking noise they made, and the multiple patter of eight feet on the move. On several occasions she had narrowly avoided the creatures as they roamed the ruins, and she was determined not to get caught now.

Then she heard the gunshots in the distance, and the noise of many spiders on the move.Who was shooting? It didn't sound like Zemler's men - they used lasers and this gunfire was percussive, not at all like the sharp crackling zing of an energy weapon.

Great, she thought. I'm an expert in ray guns now.

But she did allow herself a moment of hope, because her experience had taught her something else: for such a peace-loving man, the Doctor seemed to attract more than his fair share of gunfire. And if she could

hear shots then it could mean - just (possibly - that he was nearby.

She quickened her pace.

***

Sergeant Moslei watched the tiny flicker of light moving slowly across the computer-generated map of the ruins on his monitor screen.

'She's moving again.'

'At last,' murmured Varko. Like Moslei's, the trooper's glistening face reflected the light of the computer display in harsh patterns of red and green.

'Something's got her going.'

'The box?'

'I'm not sure.' Moslei reached a decision.'Mobilise the unit.We're going in.'

***

Julya followed the Doctor around a corner and immediately saw the battered blue box standing at the end of a short alleyway, precisely as she remembered it. The words POUCE PUBLIC CALL BOX glowed in the semidarkness, strangely reassuring. The box itself managed to look both dignified and slightly comical at the same time. Not unlike the Doctor himself, she realised.

He had bounded up to the police box and was using an oddly shaped key to unlock the door. Julya followed him inside after only a moment's hesitation and instantly had to readjust her point of focus: instead of bumping into the Doctor's back as she expected, she found herself watching him run across a wide floor space to some kind of wooden control console at the centre of an ironwork frame.

'Close the doors,' the Doctor called back to her, his voice echoing around the impossibly huge room. "That switch, there.'

Julya was standing in front of a set of huge double doors set between a pair of bronze statues. She walked as steadily as she could down a

short flight of steps to the panelled floor and flicked a blue switch. The doors buzzed shut.

'Now close your mouth; said the Doctor. He was smiling at her as he manipulated the old-fashioned controls on the hexagonal console. His face was lit by a soft glow from the thick glass tube rising from its centre to connect with a heavy iron contraption suspended overhead. High above that was a domed ceiling which Julya could barely discern.

'What... is this place?' She finally managed to ask.

There were too many things to look at: candles, plants, doorways, alcoves, books... Somewhere a cuckoo clock chimed.

'The TARDIS,' said the Doctor as he continued to flick switches and twist dials. 'Hold on to the console if you feel dizzy.'

Julya rested her hands on the warm polished wood. She did indeed feel somewhat disorientated - not in the twisting, sickening physical way of the link, but in a less definite sense. All she knew was that suddenly, after meeting the Doctor on Janus Prime, taking him to Menda, even the council chamber, she was now seeing him in his own environment, his own world. And it was evidently far more complex, weird and interesting than hers could ever be.

She opened her eyes as she sensed something warm near her face. In front of her, resting on the rim of the console, was a china cup and saucer full of brown liquid. A wisp of steam curled up from the surface.

'Excuse me,' the Doctor reached past her and picked up the cup, sipping appreciatively. 'Mmm, perfect. There's more in the pot if you want one.'

He was indicating a tray containing more cups and saucers and a curiously shaped pot which stood on a low table nearby. 'Tea,' he said.'You look like you could do with some.'

With an effort Julya put her brain back into gear. So the box was bigger on the inside than the outside. So it looked as if it had been designed about three hundred years ago. So there was a cup of tea waiting, still hot, for a man who had presumably left it there yesterday. So deal with it.

'This is your equipment, then,' she said, running her fingers over a panel

full of complicated flashing lights. From out of nowhere the Doctor's hand appeared and gently patted hers away. His long fingers twiddled with the controls as he spoke.

'Yes. The TARDIS is my home, too.'

'I kind of thought it might be.' Julya could see an ornate but comfortable-looking chair and footstool positioned on a patterned rug in front of the library.

'Do you like it?'

'It's... fantastic.'

The Doctor grinned, genuinely pleased with her reaction. 'Isn't it?'

***

Lunder had escaped to a part of the ruins free of Janusians. He had only one clip left for his ripgun, which still felt hot through his gloves. From now on he would concentrate on staying out of sight and conserving ammo. He had lost count of the number of spiders he'd wasted, but the fury had gone now. All that remained was to find Vigo.

And then what?

Lunder stiffened as he heard movement further down the avenue. Ducking back behind a series of crumbling pillars, he saw a slim, blonde-haired girl jogging wearily past. She was holding her left arm awkwardly as she ran.

Silently, and keeping to the shadows, Lunder followed her.

***

Julya put her ripgun down on the edge of the control desk, carefully, so as not to scratch the woodwork. The Doctor was absorbed in the study of a flickering brass dial on the panel before him. Presently he sighed and ran a hand through his tangle of brown hair.

"There it is, plain as the nose on your face: toxic radiation measuring eight point six on the Korman scale.' Abruptly he banged the console with the flat of his hand. 'I should have checked before we left the

TARDIS! It was unforgivable of me to expose Sam to such danger.'

He was clearly angry but Julya could see his eyes darting here and there as he continued to check and compare other readings. 'I'd have to run more tests to find out why Janus Prime is so radioactive but there isn't enough time...'

'So what do we do now?'

'We find out exactly what it was that brought the TARDIS here in the first place.'

***

Sam almost ran into the TARDIS as she rounded the corner. She was breathing heavily now, the sweat cold on her burning skin. Too exhausted to be relieved, she leaned against the police box to get her breath back. She shut her eyes and let her lungs work.

Gradually she began to feel better, although the pain in her arm was constant now, like a handful of stinging wasps trapped under a bandage.

Presently she heard something over the sound of her chest heaving and the racing of her heart. Instantly she opened her eyes and let out a sharp gasp of fear.

***

Inside the TARDIS, the Doctor was carefully adjusting a series of dials as he talked:

'Just before we arrived on Janus Prime the TARDIS hit an anomalous mass disturbance in the space-time vortex. It worried me at the time but I've been too busy to think about it since.'

The, what vortex?' asked Julya, half a beat later.

'Time for explanations later,' said the Doctor, waving her question aside. His brows were knitted in concentration as he studied the console. Presently he began to tap a brass gauge with his finger as if it were an unreliable barometer. 'Good grief, that can't be right. The TARDIS is registering the equivalent of almost one solar mass close by. And yet...'

He threw a lever from left to right and looked up.Julya followed his gaze and saw the domed ceiling above them shimmer into a perfect view of the sky outside, complete with the giant black orb of Janus Prime's moon. She could even see the burning red corona scintillating around its edge.

'Janus,' she whispered. "There's your solar mass.'

'No no no. This is something else entirely - something much closer than that old star.'

"Then what?'

'Look; murmured the Doctor. His eyes were alive with curiosity as he watched the heavens. 'Total eclipse.'

'Always is here.'

'Yes. Odd that, don't you think? That a moon should be fixed in a locked orbit at precisely the point of full eclipse?'

'I suppose so.'

'How many moons does Menda have?'

'Just the one, but its orbit is natural.'

'Hmm. Not quite twin planets, then.'

'What are you getting at?'

'Janus Prime is a very strange planet to begin with, but when you look more closely it gets stranger still.' The Doctor pointed up at the black moon. 'According to the TARDIS instruments, that moon has a far greater mass than it should, given its apparent size. The equivalent, in fact, of a small sun.'

"That's impossible. The gravitational effect alone would be incredible. It'd destroy the planet, surely.'

'Unless the mass was concealed - in hyperspace, for example.'

'Is that possible?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Look around you. Anything's possible. The question is not so much how as... why?'

'You've lost me, Doctor.'

"Think about it; he urged, his eyes blazing through the central glass column at her. 'If Menda and Janus Prime really are twin planets, and both possess moons with hugely oversized masses locked in hyperspace, what do you think would be the likely effect of that?'

'I really have no idea, but I'm sure you do.'

The Doctor grinned. 'At the very least I would expect disturbances in the local space-time continuum.'

'Disturbances?'

'Yes, dimensional bends, spatial distortions, that kind of thing...'

Realisation suddenly dawned. "The Link,' she said.

'Exactly. I told you it wasn't a matter transmitter. It's a fold in local space-time caused by that.' He jabbed a finger at the moon.

'But what does all this mean?'

'I'm not actually sure - yet. But it's all connected, I'm certain: the moons, the radiation, the Janusians... I think you and your friends, and Gustav Zemler in particular, have stumbled across far more than you bargained for. Something of immense power, hidden for centuries.'

'Doctor, you're frightening me.'

He grinned. 'I'm sorry, it's a terrible habit.' He closed down the observation dome and then quiddy drained the last of his tea. 'Come on.'

'Where are we going?'Julya jumped down off the console dais and ran after him as he headed for the exit doors.

'Out there,' he called back.'Where the truth is.'

***

The TARDIS door opened and the Doctor stepped out.

'Sam!' He threw his arms around her. 'Oh Sam, Sam, Sam, Sam, thank goodness you're safe!' His words tumbled out so fast that Julya could barely catch them.'IVe been so worried. You've been so clever finding your way back to me!'

'Doctor... I'm sorry.'

Julya followed the Doctor out and immediately caught her breath. He was hugging his young blonde friend, and she was evidently near to exhaustion. Even in the dim groundlight Jurya could see that Sam was pale and drawn. But it was the ring of spacesuited men around the TARDIS that caused her blood to run cold.

'What a very touching reunion,' said Sergeant Moslei, raising his laser pistol and aiming it at the Doctor's head. 'Pity to end it.'

Chapter Ten
Here We Go Again

'Moslei, is it?' said the Doctor, calmly, looking at the man's space helmet.'As you can see, we're unarmed.'He continued to hold Sam close to him while staring straight into the blank red visor of Moslei's space helmet.

Moslei's gun did not waver. Gradually the Doctor realised that its blunt muzzle was pointing not quite at him, but just past his right shoulder. He glanced behind him and saw Julya standing in the TARDIS doorway. Holding a ripgun.

'Except, of course, for my friend Julya here,' the Doctor added lamely.'But she's not planning to use it. Are you,Julya?'

Julya licked her top lip nervously and adjusted her grip on the gun. If anything, her trigger finger looked as if it was tightening.

'Are you, Julya?' repeated the Doctor with deliberate emphasis.

'If you have any intelligence at all, woman, you will drop the weapon now,' said Moslei, his voice flat and metallic through the helmet speaker. 'Carefully.'

'Do as he says,' instructed the Doctor.

Slowly Julya lowered the ripgun and relaxed her grip until it slipped out of her hands and thudded into the dust at her feet.

'I suppose you'd like us to raise our hands,' said the Doctor. He had not taken his eyes off Moslei.

'Any of you move without my permission and you burn,' said the sergeant. 'Clear?'

'Perhaps we could just shake hands, then?' suggested the Doctor, trying out one of his most charming smiles.

'Perhaps,' said Moslei,'you could shut the hell up. I've only just met you and I'm already tired of your voice.' The Doctor just continued to smile. 'So no moving, no talking... and no smiling. Got it?'

The Doctor stopped smiling.

'Varko,' continued Moslei,'secure the box.'

'Sir.' One of the other spacesuited troopers shouldered his laser rifle and moved towards the TARDIS. The Doctor stepped in front of him just as he reached the door.

Then it happened.

***

As the Doctor moved, so a dozen of the laser guns pointed at Julya switched their aim to him. Even Moslei's pistol dipped slightly, and it was this that gave Lunder the opportunity to fire.

He was crouched on top of a nearby wall, the ripgun aimed at the one trooper who stood with his back to him. Lunder had followed Sam to the TARDIS and witnessed Moslei's immediate arrival with his men. As the troopers had moved into position to surround the tall blue box, Lunder had climbed one of the crumbling stone walls which overlooked the alleyway and taken aim. The sight of Julya following the Doctor out of that cramped-looking box had distracted him for a second - what had they been up to in there, for God's sake? - but the relief he felt on seeing the man hug the blonde girl had brought him back to his senses.

He had waited for an appropriate distraction: he wanted as many of the troopers' guns pointing away from Julya as possible before he struck. The Doctor's blocking Varko's way into the box had been enough.

The fléchette punched through the back of the nearest trooper's helmet and exploded. Blood, bone and brain matter burst through the shattered visor. The trooper staggered forward three steps before collapsing.

There was instant chaos.

Moslei dropped to one knee and began firing in the direction his instinct told him the shot had come from. He wasn't far wrong, but Lunder had already dropped out of sight and the laser bolts burned harmless chunks out of the wall. A number of the other troopers opened fire as well, most of them aiming in completely the wrong direction. The air was suddenly full of the crackle and actinic flashes of laser weaponry.

Varko whirled around to give his comrades covering fire, although he was disciplined enough not to shoot blindly. He had not expected the Doctor to give him a hearty shove from behind, however, and ended up faceplate down in the sand.

'Run!' the Doctor shouted.

'Here we go again,' muttered Sam.'Nice to see you.' She stepped over Varko and ran for the ruins once more, keeping low to avoid the odd laser bolt. Julya made to duck back into the TARDIS, but the Doctor caught her by the arm and pulled her out. 'Not that way,' he hissed, and there was no time to argue. Julya started to move but found her way blocked by two of Moslei's men pointing laser pistols at her head.

The Doctor had taken the opportunity to shut and lock the TARDIS door, but the delay cost him dearly. One of the troopers had the presence of mind to club him with the butt of his rifle and the Doctor collapsed against the police box. Two more blows sent him to his knees and then the ground.

The battle did not last long. Lunder knew that he was completely outnumbered and a full scale confrontation would be suicide. His sole intention was to cause sufficient disruption to allow Julya to escape; as he jumped in and out of the ruins surrounding the Doctor's box, he shot off round after round from the ripgun in an effort to confuse the enemy. The shots exploded against the masonry and in the glowing dirt, some of them even hitting the odd soldier.

One man staggered back clutching the hole in his suit where the fléchette had entered, scrabbling at the wound with the thick fingers of his gloves as if he knew he had only moments before it detonated inside him. For some reason the round took a good five seconds to explode. The man was screaming until it blew him apart. Lunder watched him twisting in the dust until he died.

Lunder bent down and picked up the trooper's laser rifle. As he did so, he caught sight of the name stencilled on the front of the spacesuit collar KEJKE . Lunder blinked. He had known Kejke quite well. Kejke had fallen in with Zemler's groupies just before everything went sour. But Lunder remembered losing a few good games of poker with Kejke during the voyage from Earth, and reflected for a moment on the tiny differences that could make a friend into an enemy.

Then he heard a voice crackling through Kejke's helmet comm. It was quiet and tinny but Lunder recognised it as belonging to Varko:

'Cease fire! We Ve got the man and the woman, Sarge. The girl's missing though; the implant must be playing up. It shouldn't go down for hours.'

Next he heard Moslei saying, 'Well, until it starts up again, you'd better send some men after her. She can't have gone far.'

Lunder dosed his eyes as the fury welled up inside him. That stupid blonde slut had led Moslei and his men straight to Julya and the Doctor, and now they were prisoners. For a minute Lunder considered going back for them, but immediately discounted the notion. Reining in the anger, he considered the practicalities.

The blonde was the Doctor's girl, Sam somebody. That much was obvious by the way the Doctor had hugged the bitch. But she must have been working for Moslei and Zernler, and betrayed him. Perhaps the Doctor and Julya had been hiding from the troopers in that blue box.

Either way one thing was for sure: the girl was going to pay. Moslei had said she couldn't have gone far. Lunder stood up stiffly and cocked the ripgun. She certainly wouldn't get much further.

***

The Doctor was dragged to his feet and pushed against a wall while one of the troopers frisked him.

'He's clean.'

'I could have told you that,' said the Doctor, straightening his waistcoat and cravat.'I'm scrupulous about personal hygiene.'

'Remember what I said about talking,' said Moslei, resting the barrel of his laser pistol against the Doctor's cheek.

The Doctor ignored him. 'Are you in charge here?'

'I'm Sergeant Moslei, yes.'

'Well, I'd like to speak to your superior officer.'

"That would be Captain Zemler,' Moslei informed him. 'And you'll get to see him soon enough, don't worry.'

'This one's been disarmed too,' said Varko, pushing Julya forward. Her ammunition belts and weapons were gone, and her hands were cuffed in front of her. A few seconds later the Doctor's wrists were also bound by a pair of handcuffs.

'Take them back to the ship and prepare to return to base,' said Moslei. 'Leave ten men here to find the girl.'

'What about this?'Varko jabbed a thumb at the TARDIS. A pair of soldiers were pushing at the doors but they weren't budging.

'Break it open if you have to and let me know what's inside.'

Julya glanced nervously at the Doctor, but he was just staring impassively at the sergeant.

'What are you looking at?' Moslei asked.

'I was just wondering what you look like behind that visor.'

'Yeah?' Moslei unlocked the faceplate and slid it back over his helmet.'Take a look.'

Julya recoiled as she saw the man's face. His skin seemed to be dribbling downward and his eyes were burning red in their sockets.

The Doctor peered closer.'Perhaps I could help. I'm a doctor.' Moslei laughed hollowly.'We're beyond help. Let's go.'

***

Sam knew she couldn't run for much longer. She staggered behind a row of broken pillars and sank to her knees, exhausted. The pain in her shoulder was worse, much worse, tearing at her.

She punched her right fist into the luminous sand. At least the Doctor was still alive. At least he knew she was still alive. At least she'd managed to see him, if only for a few seconds. Not much seemed to

have changed since they were first split up, Sam reflected: the Doctor was still with that Julya person and they were still being shot at by men in spacesuits.What was he playing at? He should be stuck in, sorting all this out by now. Rescuing her would be a start.

Sam looked up as she heard movement - possibly a soldier nudging one of the pillars - close by. Very quietly, she began to crawl away.

***

The Doctor and Julya were escorted under dose guard through the ruins until they reached the patrol ship.

'I haven't seen one of these for ages,' remarked the Doctor as they approached the craft.'Craab-class, isn't it?'

'Shut up,' replied his guard.

The Doctor turned to Julya. "They were developed from the old Sitch-Hoffen shuttles which were so popular at the end of the twenty-second century.'

'I said shut up.' The trooper jabbed his rifle between the Doctor's shoulders.

'I'm only making conversation,' he replied, and turned back to Julya with an easy smile. That's the trouble with the military mind: no sense of - oof.'

The Doctor staggered forward as the rifle butt collided with his kidneys. The trooper took two quick steps and grasped a handful of his hair, yanking it back painfully so that he could look straight down into the Doctor's wide blue eyes.

'I won't warn you again. Got it?'

The Doctor stared up at his reflection in the faceplate and nodded, wincing as the movement tugged at his hair still further.

The trooper pulled him up and pushed him forward. Without another word the Doctor and Julya were marched up the ramp into the shuttle and shown to a row of metal benches bolted to the bulkhead wall. They sat down while the trooper took up a position on the opposite bench. The

name on his collar was
BLAKT.

The airlock door shut with a clang and a hiss and the remaining men took up their seats. The Doctor gave Julya a comforting smile as the engines fired with a roar. Moslei signalled for the pilot to lift off and then slumped down on to the bench next to Blakt.

'Hard day?' asked the Doctor politely.

***

Lunder looked up as he heard the troopship blast off. He saw it rise into the blackness above, the VTOL jets spurting flame and smoke.

Julya was on that ship. He punched the wall next to him in frustration as he thought how his rescue attempt had failed.

He looked back down at the sand by his feet. The girl's footprints were quite clear. They were nothing like those Lunder's combat boots would leave, nor the spacesuit boots of the soldiers.

They'd be easy to follow.

***

As the shuttle blasted off, the Doctor twisted around to look out of the horizontal slit which passed for a window behind his head. Julya could see the sadness back in his eyes. The lids looked heavy as he slowly blinked. As if aware of her attention, he said, 'I didn't do very well. Sam's still out there, somewhere.'

'So's Lunder,' she said, intending to offer some consolation, but he just shook his head slightly.

'That's what's worrying me.'

Julya sank back in her seat as the force of the craft's ascent pressed down on her shoulders. How could she make him understand? That Lunder was a good man, honourable beneath all the tough talk and gunplay? That he had fought for the colonists alongside them, selflessly and courageously. She was worried for him, but she was also worried for the future of all the people on Menda. All the Doctor seemed to care

about was Sam.

As the shuttle banked, the ruins came into view spread out across the glowing sand. The distant pattern reminded the Doctor of something.

'A web,' he murmured aloud.

'What?'

'The ruins:from up here it looks like a giant spider's web. Look!'

Julya turned to peer through the slit as well, but the shuttle was levelling out and the view of the ruins sank quickly from sight.

***

'Sit down,' ordered Moslei firmly, wondering if it had been a wise decision to allow the prisoners to ride with him in the main cabin. He had intended to throw them in the holding cell but for a last-minute change of heart. The fact was that this strange man intrigued him more than ever now and he was determined to find out as much as he could about him before handing him over to Zemler.

'Tell me,' said the Doctor conversationally as he took his seat again, 'who's going to interrogate us when we get back to your base? You or Captain Zemler?'

'Why?'

'Well, if it's going to be you, I thought we could start now.'

'Now?'

'Yes. That way we'd save some time and you won't have to bother with torture or anything because I'll tell you the truth.'

Moslei snorted.'Promise?' he asked sarcastically.

'Cross my hearts.' The Doctor grinned at him. 'Let's start with names - I'm the Doctor and this is Julya. What else would you like to know?'

Quite a few things, Moslei thought, smiling despite himself. 'What about that blue box?"

'Blue box?'

'In the ruins.'

'Oh, you mean the TARDIS. It's my spaceship. Sort of

'I see,' said Moslei levelly.

'It's actually a lot bigger inside than out; the Doctor added earnestly.

'Is it?' Moslei clearly did not believe a word, and Julya experienced a wholly inappropriate desire to laugh out loud. Blakt glanced across at his sergeant, the laser rifle aimed at the Doctor.

'Don't shoot me yet,' said the Doctor, fixing Blakt with a sudden piercing stare.'Let me talk to Zemler first.'

Moslei was intrigued.'Why do you want to see him?'

'I want to talk to him about the situation here. I believe he's been experimenting on the Janusians.'

'Janusians?'

"The local spider creatures.'

'What's it to you?'

The Doctor leaned forward. "The Janusians, the radiation, the Link to Menda - they're all connected. Even the ruins back there tell us something.'

'What?'

'That the spiders once ruled this planet, and certainly had a civilisation here. The buildings down there were all designed for large eight-legged arthropods. Those spiders, or their descendants, hold the key to all this.'

'You talk a lot, Doctor, but you don't make much sense.'

'Listen to me,' the Doctor urged him. 'You're all sitting on a powder keg of immeasurable power and Gustav Zemler's playing with the fuse.'

'You're mad,' Moslei told him, and then muttered under his breath:'You and Zemler should get on fine.'

The Doctor appeared to hear him.'Zemler's ill. You all are. The radiation affects your minds as well as your bodies.'

'What would you know about it?'

'At a guess I'd say the radiation destroys the body's lipids. Without them the membranes holding each and every cell in your body together simply disintegrate. You literally just fall apart. The damage is cumulative, though, which is why you have to be exposed to the radiation for a certain length of time. Eventually the body's recuperative ability is overpowered and the decay sets in. As death occurs, the cellular dissolution speeds up exponentially as the body stops fighting it.'

'Is there no way to cure it, Doctor?' asked Julya.'Or halt it,even?'

He shook his head.'I don't know. The fact that the body puts up a fight is a good sign, however - and that's why its progress is so slow. It must be terribly painful.' The Doctor's final words were spoken with such quiet compassion that Moslei blinked and looked away from his gaze. Julya glanced across at the old soldier and suddenly felt an unexpected pang of sympathy.

'We get by with painkillers,' Moslei told him.

'They can't last for ever,' said Julya.

'I stopped taking mine a month ago to conserve supplies.'

'You must be in agony,' said the Doctor.

'I was trained to ignore pain,' Moslei said, a little pompously.

'Is it working?'

'No.'

***

Varko was having no luck with the blue box. He had tried to kick the

doors in at first but they proved stronger than they looked -a lot stronger, because they had gone on to resist, with equal fortitude, the attentions of a crowbar, a laser pistol, a laser rifle and, finally, a point-impact fusion grenade. None had left so much as a mark on the old blue paintwork. Now he was left standing in front of the wretched thing with a couple of troopers waiting for instructions.

'A slicer would cut through it,' offered one.

Yes, thought Varko. Maybe a plasma beam would do it - and maybe not. Before he could reply, however, his helmet comm buzzed as one of the troopers searching the vicinity for Sam Jones called in.

'She's lying low,' said Rosnan's voice.'She must be.'

'Keep looking,' said Varko irritably. He was beginning to understand how Moslei must feel.

'We could do with a couple of spidroids to help,' grumbled Rosnan.

Varko agreed. 'If we don't find her soon we may have to bring them in.' He switched off the comm and kicked sand at the tall blue box.'Get me a slicer gun.'

***

As the shuttle dropped towards Zemler's base, the Doctor once again turned to peer out of the slitted porthole. He could see the dome quite clearly, and next to it a flattened patch of ground burnt black and smooth by the blasts of repeated take-offs and landings. It was to this area that the ship was headed.

'Nice place you've got here,' commented the Doctor.'I recognise the design. Those little constructor-droids, I'd imagine. What's that?'

He was pointing to a low square structure appended to the rear of the dome. Its walls and flat roof appeared to be formed by sections of heavy grille like a large cage.

'Spider pen,' said Moslei. 'We capture the wild ones and keep them in there until we need them. We have a special cybernetics unit transforming them into spidroids.'

'There's nothing special about turning living creatures into mindless slaves,' said the Doctor darkly.

***

The shuttle touched down on the landing pad with a painful scream. As the engines whined to a stop, the troopers got to their feet, collected their weapons and began to file out. Jutya found it difficult to reconcile these tired and broken men as her hated enemy. What had happened to the arrogant, thuggish band of mercenaries who had accompanied her on the journey from Earth? But, as she followed the men out of the shuttle and felt the cold air on her face, saw the blackness of the sky and the rotting phosphorescence of the ground at her feet, she knew.

There was a spidroid standing by the entrance tunnel to the dome, along with two armed soldiers. The spidroid clicked and whirred as they were taken inside, its metal antennae following their progress. Jutya shivered as she walked past it, and then heard the Doctor's soft voice in her ear

'Don't worry. In a way the spidroids are less dangerous than the wild Janusians. At least they can be remotely controlled by the soldiers.'

"That's not very reassuring.'

'No, on second thoughts, perhaps it isn't.'

They fell into a gloomy silence as they were marched into the darkness of the entry tunnel, and all that could be heard was the noise of the entrance hatch closing like the lid of a coffin.

***

Sam thought she was getting to know the ruins quite well now, or at least a small part of them. At first she was worried that she was going around in circles when she began to see the same row of broken pillars, or a particular archway, or a certain pile of rubble, but then she decided that they were in fact useful landmarks which could be used to navigate. In a few minutes she found she had drawn a rough map of the area in her head - the location of the TARDIS at its centre, and a number of familiar landmarks dotted around it for a distance of about one hundred metres.

It gave her a feeling of some security, and a method by which she could

successfully avoid the spacemen who were still patrolling the area, probably looking for her. The TARDIS was being worked on by a couple of troopers with heavy weaponry but Sam knew that the ship wasn't going to cave in in a hurry and left them to it.

She had to formulate a plan. In all likelihood the Doctor and Julya were now prisoners. Sam had seen the shuttle take off and presumably head back for the base dome, so she knew the direction she had to travel in and could plot a rough course through the ruins based on her landmarks. It was, perhaps, this new-found familiarity with her surroundings that allowed her to turn a corner and come face to face with the biggest damn spider she had ever seen.

It was twice her height, and she could plainly see its eight glossy black eyes - some the size of tennis balls - right in the middle of its head. Below these were a pair of thick fangs oozing a viscous liquid which sizzled when it dripped on to the sand below.

The acid fangs suddenly sprang wide open with a sucking hiss, and Sam stood paralysed with fear as the monster bore down on her.

Chapter Eleven
Lock-Up

'All right, Blakt; said Moslei. 'I'll take them from here.'

Blakt glanced at the prisoners, who both stood to one side with their hands cuffed. The man was staring at him in a way he didn't like - and then he just smiled. Blakt was sure that the Doctor could actually see through the reflective visor of his space helmet, see the puzzled expression on his molten face.

'They're unarmed,' Moslei pointed out patiently.'And secure.' He drew his own sidearm. 'I'll take charge of them myself. You can clear off until eleven hundred hours.'

Blakt threw a sloppy salute and stalked off down the passage, his rifle hanging loosely in one hand. As he disappeared around the bend in the corridor, the Doctor said, 'You just can't get the staff these days, can you?'

Moslei cast him a hostile look. "Things have changed a lot for us since we came to Janus Prime, Doctor. The lads have lost a fair bit of their self-respect.'

'Did they ever have any?' asked Julya.

'Some. But it's difficult to keep a grip when your skin's melting.' The Doctor nodded solemnly as Moslei continued.'A couple of the men committed suicide rather than rot away. Half a dozen deserted.'

'Where to?'

Moslei shrugged. 'Probably ended up as spider food.' He motioned with his pistol for them to move, and they proceeded down the passageway. "This place makes as good a tomb as any.'

Presently they came to a doorway marked RESTRICTED ACCESS and Moslei told them to stop.

'Are we getting the full tour?' inquired the Doctor.

'Just the edited highlights,' Moslei said without smiling. He pressed a

series of buttons set into a panel on the wall and the door slid open.'Inside.'

The Doctor and Julya stepped into a small room filled with computers and monitoring equipment. A curved Plexiglas window gave on to a view of the luminous desert outside.

'This is the communications control unit for the spidroids,' Moslei told them.

The Doctor said, 'Now I understand why you dismissed Blakt. I gather we're seeing a little more of things than the average prisoner, hmm?'

'Quite. But don't misunderstand me, Doctor. Prisoners you still are.' Moslei activated one of the consoles with one hand, careful to keep his pistol trained on them with the other. Julya noticed that the barrel of the gun tended to point in her direction, presumably because Moslei knew that she was a Mendan combatant, and that the Doctor evidently was not.

'I wanted you to see this,' Moslei was saying as the control monitor lit up. He replayed the images recorded in the ruins of the Doctor and Sam emerging from the TARDIS.

'I hate watching myself on TV, don't you?' said the Doctor.

'This part is particularly interesting,' said Moslei as the spidroid's final signal was replayed - that of the Doctor standing, apparently unafraid, in front of the creature as it scanned him.

'Watch this bit,' said the Doctor, grinning.

On the screen, the Doctor offered the spidroid some chocolate. Shortly after, the picture zigzagged wildly and then went blank.

'A very effective piece of sabotage,' noted Moslei.

'It was nothing, really,' said the Doctor.'It just didn't like fruit 'n' nut.'

Moslei eyed him for several long seconds before continuing.

'The spidroid's biosensors recorded a number of interesting facts about you, Doctor, before you scrambled its brains.'

The Doctor looked affronted. 'I did no such thing.'

Moslei ignored him. 'Two hearts, Doctor. The spidroid gave me a full physiological breakdown. You're not from Earth, are you?'

'I don't recall claiming to be.'

'So where are you from?'

'Does it matter?'

Moslei was silent for a moment. 'I'm not sure. Yet. It depends what my men find in thatpolice box of yours.'

The Doctor could not fail to notice the stress Moslei placed on the word 'police'. 'I think you might be jumping to conclusions, Sergeant. I'm no policeman.'

'No, I don't think you are... but there's something you're not telling me.'

The Doctor held his cuffed hands up in apology. 'If you think I'm here after you or your men, then you're mistaken.'

'There's a few people on Earth who bear Gustav Zemler a grudge or two, Doctor. And his men. We came on this godforsaken trip to get away from them.' Moslei switched off the monitors. 'I never thought we'd end up avoiding them quite so permanently.'

'It's not over yet,' said the Doctor.'There's always hope.'

'We'll see. But the jury's still out on you, Doctor. I just wanted a quiet word before Zemler gets his hands on you.'

'Are we going to see him now?'

'Not yet. I want to see him first. You'll have to wait in the cells.'

'Yes, it's about time I was locked up somewhere.' The Doctor flashed one of his easy grins. 'Lead on, Sergeant.'

***

Sam had actually lost count of how many times she had stared certain death in the face since joining up with the Doctor, but this was another occasion to add to the list. She felt the now familiar spasm of fear pass through her as the spider's massive jaws opened wide.

Then she felt the similarly familiar sensation of terrified relief as the final end never actually came. The spider had jumped backwards rather than forwards. A thin stream of black goo was pouring from its mouth and it started to thrash its head section from side to side. Sam watched, still frozen with fear, as its jaws were suddenly ripped apart by a small explosion.

The spider twisted and turned as several entry wounds opened up rapidly along its flank. Seconds later the explosive rounds blew and the creature was hurled sideways, spraying blood across the ruins. It hit a wall and curled up in a ball of quivering legs, dead.

'Jesus Christ,' said Sam.

Standing to one side of her was a tall man of about thirty-five with short black hair and rugged good looks. Rugged good looks! What made her think that? What a cliche! And now he was walking towards her. Walking towards her and raising his gun.

And pointing it at her.

'I take it you killed that thing?' she managed to ask, her voice cracking.

'Yup.'

'I suppose you saved my life.'

'Don't thank me,' said the man.'I just wanted you for myself.'

And then he pulled the trigger.

***

Before they reached the detention cell, the Doctor and Julya were taken past a pair of large curved doors which obviously led out of the dome. Inset in the doors were Plexiglas panels, and, as they walked past, the Doctor stopped to look through one of them. He couldn't see much, however, because it was dark outside, so he cupped his hands around

his eyes to cut out the light from the corridor.

'That's the spider pen,' said Moslei.

'Really? I can't see much.'

'We keep it dark. They don't seem to move much then.'

'Spiders don't see all that well, even though they have eight eyes. They respond to different levels in the light. Wait! I can see something.'

Julya couldn't resist. She stood on tiptoe to peer through the other window. 'Where?'

'Right at the back. Something moved.'

"That'll be Big Henry,' said Moslei.

' "Big Henry"?' the Doctor repeated, turning to cast a look at the soldier. 'Don't tell me the rough-tough scourge of the Cybermen give their spiders pet names.'

'Don't ask me how the old bugger came to be called that. All I know is he's a big guy and he's called Henry. Now, if you don't mind, I'm supposed to be locking you up.'

The Doctor nodded just as Julya gave a gasp. In a second he was back at the window.'What?'

'I thought I saw something move. Right at the back. It's too dark but... something big. Really... big.'

'Maybe that's Really Big Henry,' suggested the Doctor.

They watched for a full minute longer but saw nothing more. Reluctandy they stood down and moved on as Moslei grew impatient. He directed them further into the dome until they reached a large metallic block marked FUSION GRID. Status indicators lit the passageway a fiery red.

"That doesn't look very safe,' commented the Doctor.

'It's not,' agreed Moslei. 'But we can't honesdy find it in ourselves to care. Just move.' He gestured with the pistol at the door to the detention

cell next to the reactor. The Doctor went inside and Julya followed. As the door slid shut, Moslei keyed a sequence of buttons on the adjacent wall and a series of locks clicked home.

Moslei stood for a second thinking about his prisoners. The woman was a Mendan and evidently terrified despite her combatant status. Moslei knew that the bulk of the Mendan defence force had been recruited from farmers and engineers, so he wasn't particularly worried about her one way or another. But the Doctor was different. He wasn't one of the colonists, he didn't appear to be hostile and certainly wasn't an aggressor, but nonetheless Moslei instinctively felt he was dangerous.

The man obviously didn't understand Gustav Zemler for a start. Moslei wasn't even sure if he understood Zemler any more: the man had changed beyond the simple physical decay. If the Doctor was right, and the radiation sickness ate into the brain as well, there could be no hope for Zemler. Or for anybody else.

Moslei felt a prickling fear creep into his own mind. Was his own slow dereliction of duty the first signs of the madness? A madness that had to follow the corruption of his own body as surely as night follows day? With a shudder he pulled off a glove and examined the red raw hand beneath. The dead skin had perished, leaving the thick blue veins and scarlet flesh exposed. The pain had gone beyond anything he could describe now. He made a fist and watched as the pressurised capillaries burst under his swollen knuckles. Eventually his own brain would follow suit. But how long did he have? He could stay like this for months more, the progress of the radiation undetectable. Perhaps if he was lucky, he would be driven mad before he died. Like Zemler.

Abruptly the sergeant turned and retraced his steps to the monitoring unit, calling up Varko on the communicator. 'Varko. This is Moslei. Cracked that box open yet?"

'Urn, no, Sarge. We can't get into it.'

Moslei frowned. 'Why not?'

'Don't know, Sarge. We've tried everything but the doors just won't budge. Anson reckons it's protected by a force wall or something.'

Somehow Moslei wasn't surprised: nothing seemed to be straightforward any more.'I suppose you've failed to catch the girl as well?'

'We could do with a couple of spidroids to help,'Varko said by way of reply.'It's the ruins, Sarge. They make it difficult:

'My god,Varko, this is how it all started!'

For a second Moslei considered calling the search off entirely, thinking that the girl probably wasn't important enough to warrant this level of attention. But Zemler had been insistent, and Moslei knew he would be waiting for his report. And besides, Moslei had never been one for overlooking the details or taking the easy option. He was not comfortable with the idea of any rogue element loose on Janus Prime: it was a mistake to underestimate any enemy, even a hypothetical one.

'All right,' he said. 'I'll send one spidroid in with a handler. But it's no longer necessary to catch her alive, Varko. I just want her dealt with - kill her if you have to.'

***

In their cell, the Doctor and Julya were arguing.

'I can't believe I've just walked into a prison cell in Gustav Zemler's base,' complained Julya, massaging her temples nercely.'I knew I should never have come back here.'

'Relax.' The Doctor peered earnestly into her eyes. ''Things couldn't be any better.'

'What?' she sounded incredulous.

'He's got us exactly where I want us.'

'You are mad, aren't you?'

'No - just very, very clever.'

Julya closed her eyes and took a deep breath.'Doctor. Please tell me how following Lunder to this cesspit planet, being attacked by carnivorous spiders, risking a lethal dose of the local radiation, then being imprisoned in the enemy HQ can possibly help us.'

'Because now we've been left alone, we're free to have a look round for

ourselves.'

'Aren't you forgetting something, Doctor?' Julya raised an eyebrow and gave the handcuffs around her wrists a meaningful rattle.

'Ah,' said the Doctor. He reached behind Julya's right ear with his own bound hands and plucked out a small electronic key card. He then inserted this deftly into the lock of his own handcuffs and smiled as they sprang open.

Julya gaped. 'Where did you get that?'

He threw off his handcuffs and moved to unlock hers.'I took it from Blakt earlier.'

'When he beat you up on the way on to the shuttle?'

"That's right.'

With a slight frown Julya watched her handcuffs fall off. 'You mean to tell me youVe had the key to these things all this time?'

'Yes. There didn't seem to be much point in using it before now, though.'

'No, I suppose not. But you're forgetting something else.'Julya pointed at the cell door. 'That's been locked using sonic code bolts, and there isn't a key.'

'Sonic code bolts, you say?' The Doctor crossed over to the door. 'Piece of cake. Good job they thought we couldn't use our pockets.'

A few seconds' work with his sonic screwdriver scrambled the encryption barriers inside the locking mechanism and the door hissed open.'After you.'

'So what now?'

'I told you, I want to see Gustav Zemler.'

Julya stopped in her tracks. 'Doctor, do you really think that's wise? The man is totally insane. Hell kill us as soon as look at us.'

'Will he? Why?'

'Because he hates us.'

'He doesn't hate me. He doesn't even know me.'

The Doctor started off down the passageway again, but Julya caught his arm. 'Shouldn't we press our advantage and get out of here? If we can get to the shuttle we could steal it, get back to the ruins and find Lunder.'

The Doctor rounded on her, talking urgently but quietly:

'Now you're the one who's forgetting something. My friend Sam is out there too. I have to find her and get her off Janus Prime before the radiation overcomes her body's natural defences.'

'Then for Sam's sake we should go now!'

'Not until I've seen Zemler. If we go now then Zemler will be free to do whatever he likes with whatever it is he's got here, and if I'm right then there will be very little point in rescuing Sam, Lunder, or every last man and woman on Menda because Zemler holds all their lives - and ours - in his hands.'

'But how?'

'That,' hissed the Doctor,'is what I am trying to find out.'

They moved on, the Doctor instinctively heading further into the base. It was a lot bigger than Julya had at first thought, although there didn't seem to be many guards about - those that they did come across were easily avoided. Presently they turned a corner and the Doctor suddenly dropped to the floor. Julya crouched down besides him.'What's the matter?'

Silently the Doctor pointed ahead and upward. In the semidarkness of the corridor, a wide rectangle of bright light could be seen just around the curve of the inner wall.

The Doctor was crawling towards it. Staying low, he positioned himself so that he could peek over the low edge of the long window. The band of light reflected by his face showed his eyes widen in alarm.

Julya shuffled over and joined him. The window overlooked a large

laboratory dominated by a Janusian spider. It was suspended upside down from the ceiling, its bulbous torso rigged with a series of wide plastic straps to keep it in place. Two pairs of legs on either side had been bound together and secured with heavy chains to the walls and floor, thus keeping the creature immobile and spread-eagled.

Three spacesuited men were working on the Janusian with a variety of tools; its frontal section, where the legs met the body, had been split open to reveal its internal organs. There were already a number of metal implants visible in the exposed flesh, and one of the men was using a welding torch to fix another piece of cybernetic equipment into position. Occasionally a little shower of sparks would burst from the tool as he worked like a mechanic.Julya watched the sparks drop to the floor where they fizzled out in a puddle of blood.

'I think I'm going to be sick; she whispered.

'Oh, dear,' said the Doctor. At first she thought he was concerned for her wellbeing, but then he added, 'It's still conscious.'

Every time the welder touched the cybernetic parts and the sparks flew, the spider gave a tiny convulsion - all it could manage given its bindings.

Julya covered her mouth with a hand.

'It's nothing less than torture; said the Doctor angrily.

'Do you think we should stop them?'Julya started to stand, but the Doctor held her down.

'Wait.We're too late...'

Another of Zemler's men stepped up to the Janusian. He reached into the middle of the excoriated section and grasped a lump of blue-grey flesh resting between two thick pink tubes.

'What's he doing?'

The Doctor was grim-faced. 'Removing its brain.'

The gloved hands pulled the organ from position, and the spider gave a final shudder. A second man inserted a small metal box trailing wires into the open wound. A robot trolley moved to join him, its tray full of

scalpels, forceps, clamps, hand-drills and spanners.

The Doctor continued his commentary, his voice barely a whisper:'He's bypassed the spinal nerve which runs through the pedicel. Now he's inserting something into the chelicerae -probably a booster duct for the digestive acid.'

Julya looked away, unable to cope. The Doctor's expression, however, had altered from angry disgust to clinical interest. His gaze followed the man who held the spider's brain as he crossed the room and then slung the grey matter into a large bin full of spider offal.

'What a waste,' the Doctor murmured. He slid back down out of sight and put his arms around Julya. "This must be what your friend Vigo saw. It's got to stop.'

Julya spoke through her teeth. 'If I had a gun with me I'd stop them right now.'

'Yes, well, that's guns for you.' He patted her arm. 'I'd prefer to find a way of stopping them without taking any more life. Come on.'

He moved off, staying low while under the observation window. Julya followed him, grateful for the chance to leave this place. She followed him down the corridor, and around a corner, which led even deeper into the base dome. As the Doctor came to another sudden halt she practically walked into him. Then, before she knew it, he had whirled around and clamped a large hand over her mouth. She watched his lips say,'Guards.'

Just around the bend were a pair of large steel doors, and guarding these were two soldiers carrying laser rifles. The Doctor let Julya see them and then pulled her back out of sight.

'This is the centre of the dome,' the Doctor said quietly.'It must be where Zemler is.'

'You'll never get past them,' whispered Julya when they were out of earshot.

'I will with your help."

'What do you mean?'

The Doctor gave her a sudden quizzical look.'Tell me, have you ever played with matches?'

***

Moslei stepped through the double doors to Zemler's sanctum and experienced a sudden chill. It was more than just the drop in temperature due to this part of the dome being exposed to the elements: it was indefinable yet sinister - undoubtedly something to do with Zemler's unnatural presence here.

He had hoped that he would have grown used to it by now, but it took him by surprise every time. It was the same feeling he had whenever he looked into the eyes of a corpse - that sense of empty regret, even for a stranger, that there was no more life to be lived, no more memories to be made or recalled. Nothing more to be said. All that was left was meat.

Zemler's room was like that: it had the atmosphere of a place whose purpose had long gone, leaving only the physical remains.

When the dome had been assembled by the construction drones brought through the Link from Menda, Zemler had decided its exact location. The drones had been programmed to erect the base around the alien column Zemler had become so fascinated with. He had been convinced, in those days, that the column represented the controls for some kind of matter-transmission device which could provide a way for the soldiers to return to Earth. Even then, Moslei had thought this was unlikely, that the theory owed more to Zemler's wishful thinking than evidence, but not even he had been able to hide his disappointment when the control column proved useless.

Zemler had locked himself away with the thing almost immediately after the radiation sickness had been diagnosed. There was no way off Janus Prime now and the captain became consumed with the idea of revenge against the colonists on Menda. It was difficult to live with the idea that they were all living happy lives in comparative comfort on an unspoilt world, while the men who had brought them there and protected them were sentenced to death on Janus Prime. There was not a man here, Moslei included, who didn't feel bitter and angry, or afraid.

Zemler had once been the most accessible officer Moslei had ever known. Now he kept himself hidden away in the dark, working away at

the mystery of the control column. In the last week he had taken to stroking a smooth white ball the size of a man's head which rested on a plinth by the command chair. Moslei couldn't see it very well but it had a slightly glossy sheen like bone. He had a nasty suspicion it was somebody's skull.

'Well?'

Moslei had always respected his captain. In his heyday the man had been a good soldier, a tenacious fighter... a friend, even. But now the man's voice was as unrecognisable as the ravaged features which made up the wreckage of his face, and Moslei knew that the thoughts behind that voice were equally distorted.

He stepped forward. 'There's been a further incursion. The Mendans must have sent a rescue party for the man they left behind.'

Zemler shifted slightly in his chair.'And the girl?'

'She led us to the box eventually, but then eluded us.' Moslei waited for a response, but there was nothing save the slow laboured breathing in the darkness. "There was a fight,' he continued. 'We lost her.'

'And the box?'

'Continues to defy all our attempts to open it.'

'How disappointing.'

Moslei swallowed. 'Sir.'

'Is that your report?' Zemler drew a gloved finger along the bony carapace of the ball beside him.'Total failure?'

'No, sir. While securing the box I also succeeded in capturing the individual who came out of it originally.'

'Ah - now that is good news. Who is he?'

Moslei relaxed fractionally. At least now he had only facts to impart.'He calls himself the Doctor. I'm certain he's not one of the Mendan colonists, but he may be working for them.'

Zemler seemed to consider this in silence for a second. All Moslei could see was the blank visage of his helmet faceplate. Dimly he was aware of an alarm sounding somewhere in the base, but he was distracted by Zemler's next words:

"This Doctor... what does he want?'

'I'm not sure. He says he wants to help.' Moslei couldn't resist injecting a note of scorn into his voice.

Zemler laughed as well.'Where's he from?'

'I'm a Time Lord from Gallifrey, originally,' said a voice from behind Moslei,'but I'm something of a wanderer now.'

The Doctor stepped into the light from the pit and smiled. 'Sorry I'm late. Got lost in the corridors.'

Chapter Twelve
Regarding Henry

Sam flinched as the gun went off in her face. She felt the heat, smelled the soft hairs on her cheeks burn off, heard the thunderclap somewhere near the middle of her skull.

Reflexively she turned around, partly to avoid looking at the muzzle flash, partly to see where the shot went. She saw a spacesuited man lurch back clutching his chest and then jump spasmodically as if something had exploded inside him.

She looked back at the man who had fired the gun, shocked. His eyes were narrow slits of hate - directed at her.

'So who the hell are you? Guardian angel doesn't quite seem appropriate.'

She caught the tiniest glimpse of white teeth as he replied - and for all the world she was convinced he was going to say something like,'Your worst nightmare,' but he just said.'Lunder.'

Then he grabbed her arm in one large fist and she yelled out loud.

'Leave off! I've wounded my -'

He clipped her across the head with the barrel of his gun. She gritted her teeth as the man started to drag her body towards the archway leading into one of the nearest ruined buildings. Once past the threshold he hurled her to the floor where she lay curled up, biting her lip to avoid screaming with the pain.

She looked up, aware that her face was wet with tears but knowing that they were born of pain and not fear. She looked Lunder in the eyes, made her own as narrow as his.

'Go on, then,' she said. 'Do it. Shoot me. Show me what a man you are.'

***

When Julya had left the Doctor, she made straight for tht communication control centre where Moslei had shown them the images from the

spidroid. The RESTRICTED ACCESS door was shut, but when she looked through the clear plastic panel Julya could see a trooper sitting at the controls, his back to her.

She swore under her breath. She hadn't anticipated having to deal with one of Moslei's soldiers. She looked quickly around for anything she could use as a weapon.

There was a series of metal rungs sent into the curve of the inner wall to serve as an access ladder to the ceiling. As the whole dome was designed to be dismantled at a moment's notice, it didn't take long to unlock the clasps that held one of the rungs to the wall and detach it. Julya weighed the metal rod in one hand like a club. It was heavy enough.

Tucking it under one arm, she took out the box of matches the Doctor had given her. She then lit one as instructed - scraping the head against the strip of rough material on the side of the little box. She then used that match to light four more which she held together. The white flame jerked and flared in the semidarkness of the corridor.

As intended, this generated enough focused heat for the dome's internal sensors to register and react to. With a sudden gush, jets of fire-retardant foam blasted from nozzles set into the ceiling. At the same time an alarm buzzer began echoing along the corridor.

Julya dropped the matches and drew her improvised club as the door to the communications unit hissed open. The trooper who stepped out to investigate the alarm also stepped straight into Julya's first swing. The ladder rung cracked the helmet faceplate and the trooper staggered back. The second blow shattered the visor completely, exposing the face behind it. Julya made no attempt to look at the face. She just pictured the Janusian spider in the laboratory flinching as men like this one tore out its guts and replaced them with machinery. She swung the club a third time and the man collapsed to the floor, stunned.

Julya entered the comms unit and sat down at the controls. It took only a few moments to isolate the fire alarm and neutralise it. The alarm should have sounded long enough to distract the guards outside Zemler's room. She only hoped the Doctor knew what he was doing.

She only hopedshe knew what she was doing, for that matter.

***

In the centre of the room was the tall blue-black cylinder, standing in a circle of glowing sand. A walkway stretched around the circumference of the shallow pit.

The Doctor paused as his shoe slipped in something. He looked down and saw a thin trail of slime coating the metal grille which formed the floor. There was a piece of material stuck to it; after a few seconds he recognised it as the remains of a Mendan combat vest. In the dim blue light he could just make out the name on the label: VIGO.

'So... you are the Doctor,' Gustav Zemler was saying.

The Doctor looked up from the floor and continued on his way around the edge of the pit to address the spacesuited figure sitting on a large chair. It reminded him uncomfortably of a throne.

'And you must be Captain Zemler,' the Doctor said eventually. 'Pleased to meet you.'

If Zemler was surprised by the Doctor's sudden arrival or cheery demeanour, he disguised it well. Moslei, by contrast, was most definitely surprised.'How did you get in here?' he demanded.

I just opened the doors and walked in.'

'But the guards -'

'Have something else on their minds.' The Doctor smiled apologetically.

Moslei turned to Zemler.'Captain -'

Zemler raised a hand to silence him. It struck the Doctor as an oddly regal gesture - slow but definite, used to being obeyed.'No matter, Moslei. I'm perfectly willing to talk with you, Doctor.'

'Thank you.'

'What is it that you want?'

'I want to help you.'As he moved closer, the Doctor was able to see Zemler a little more clearly. The man was sprawled in a relaxed manner,

one leg crossed over the other, his left arm draped along the back of his chair. If it wasn't for the spacesuit, he might well have been a bored king. One gloved hand rested on an off-white sphere the size of a football. The Doctor could not make out what it was in the dim light - some kind of egg, or a skull perhaps?

Gradually the Doctor became aware of a soft, repetitive sucking noise emanating from the man's helmet. Zemler was laughing.

'You're a fool, Doctor, and so are those Mendan friends of yours. You just don't understand, do you?' Zemler sat forward. The Doctor could see his own face reflected in the man's visor, long and flat. 'You think I sit here like a slug under a rock, powerless, waiting to die. But you're wrong: I won't die. Not yet. Not until I have demonstrated to them the minuscule irrelevance of their lives.'

Even Moslei was surprised by this exclamation. 'I'm not sure I follow you, sir.'

Zemler laughed again, very quietly. "There's no reason why you should, Moslei. No reason at all.'

'But I do,' said the Doctor. He pointed to the thick blue column at the centre of the room. "That's part of a control system for a dimensional bridge through hyperspace. There's one very like it on Menda. I'm not sure what exactly it is for... but I think you know.'

'Indeed I do,' agreed Zemler as he gently stroked the pale orb nearby.'It is the answer to all our sorrows.'

'I very much doubt that.'

'Really? And what puts you in a position to judge? You don't know what it's for, Doctor. I do.'

The Doctor jumped down into the pit and touched the column. It gave out a loud hum, just one note, until he let go.

'You've even got it working,' he breathed.

Moslei watched the Doctor circle the column, lit from below by the sand. In his old-fashioned clothes he looked like a ghost. His eyes betrayed the anxiety he struggled to keep out of his voice. 'How?'

Zemler had leaned forward the moment the Doctor dropped into the pit. Now he sat back, satisfied that he still had the upper hand.'I simply asked the right people,' he said.

'The Janusians.'

'Is that what you call them? How quaint.'

'They know, don't they?' the Doctor guessed, eagerly. 'They know what it's for, how it works. How to use it.'

It was impossible to see what Zemler was thinking: with the visor of his helmet lowered, his expression was unreadable. Moslei knew there was little left of his face to read any more, but he had learned to recognise the man's body language instead. Now the captain seemed to stiffen and sit up, tense and alert. His fingers dug into the ball and Moslei was surprised to see that it was slightly soft. Then, as if exerting conscious control over his emotions, Zemler just sighed. 'If you really want to know, Doctor, I can arrange for you to ask them all about it yourself.'

'Yes, I'd like that very much.'

'No,' said Zemler. 'You wouldn't.'

Moslei had been concentrating on the altercation so hard he had failed to notice the arrival of two troopers. They had taken up position on the far side of the blue column, just out of his line of vision. In former days he would not have missed them, but he could no longer count on sharp eyesight or keen hearing. As Zemler spoke, the troopers moved to cover the Doctor with their laser rifles.

The Doctor ignored them, continuing his close inspection of the cylinder instead. Several times in the last few minutes he had made as if to touch it, but held back at the last second as if afraid of what might happen. Now he reached out again and paused, his fingers a hair's breadth from the burnished surface.

'Don't touch it,' ordered Zemler.

'Scared?' asked the Doctor. He moved his fingers fractionally closer.

'No,' said Zemler. 'Just patient. You have five seconds to step back

before my men shoot you.'

The Doctor laughed. 'I just thought - wouldn't it be funny if I pressed this and a can of fizzy drink dropped out?'

'Five. Four. Three.

'All right!' the Doctor stepped back and raised his hands. One of the troopers jumped down into the pit with him and raised his rifle threateningly.

'No more rifle butts, please!' pleaded the Doctor.'I've had more than enough today, thank you.'

'Take him away,' said Zemler.

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'Take me to your spider.'

***

Julya knew that her time in the communications control unit would be limited. The fire alarm would be exposed as a hoax within minutes, but its purpose had only been to allow the Doctor an opportunity to enter Zemler's chamber - not to allow Julya time to access the enemy's comnet. She was about to leave when a brief scan through the computer revealed that a spidroid had been dispatched to the ruins to locate the Doctor's girl, Sam. The computers in all the spidroids' brains were slaved to this system and Julya noted with alarm that this one was due to be tuned to some sort of tracking device currently located in the ruins. The implication was clear - Sam had been bugged, and it would not take long for a spidroid to home in on her now.

There had to be a way to stop it.

'Stand up, and step away from those controls,' said a voice behind her.

Julya froze.

In the reflection from the monitor screen, she could see Blakt in the doorway, his gun aimed at her head.

***

In the ruins, Varko had turned his back on the old blue box. There was only so much time you could waste on attempting the impossible.

A young trooper stepped up. "The spidroid's here, Varko.'

Varko trudged around the corner and suppressed his fear at the sight of the monstrous eight-legged creature standing motionless, awaiting instructions. There was always a tiny element of doubt in his mind about these things: perhaps it was just the applications of cybertechnology that made him feel uneasy.

'OK,' he said to the youth who had followed dutifully at his heels.'The girl had a tracer implanted in her arm, set to a beta-nine frequency. Run that into the spidroid's search-and-locate programs and let it go.'

***

Julya raised her hands as Blakt kept the pistol trained on her.'Out,' he said. She could hear him breathing hard inside his helmet. When she stepped out of the communications room she realised why he was so distressed. Lying on the floor of the corridor was the spacesuit of the man she had clubbed with the ladder rung. A stream of mud-coloured liquid had poured from the broken helmet and congealed in a vast puddle against the far wall. The suit was almost flat.

'Did you do that?' asked Blakt shakily.

Julya nodded, dumbly.'I must have. I didn't mean to -'

Blakt jerked his gun. For a second she thought he was going to shoot her dead. Instead he just motioned her forward.

'Move.'

'Where are we going?'Julya wanted to ask about the Doctor but was wary of saying anything that might complicate matters.

'I'm going to feed you to the spider,' said Blakt, simply. 'And screw any other orders.'

Julya felt the sweat spring out of every pore in her body as Blakt walked her along the passage. 'Why should we just let you rot here with us,' he continued, 'when Big Henry's got to eat?'

They reached the large doors that looked out into the dome's spider pen, the doors that she and the Doctor had peered through earlier to try to catch a glimpse of the giant spider. Now it seemed she was to get more than a glimpse.

Blakt stayed well back, the pistol still pointing at her. She had no doubt that the slightest untoward motion on her part would result in a laser bolt through the head. She watched, perfectly still, as Blakt reached out and pulled the lever that released the doors. They hissed open to reveal a small airlock. Another door, thicker and airtight, lay beyond.

'Inside.'

'Please,' said Julya. 'Don't.'

'Did Maknall ask you not to kill him?'

'Maknall?'

'He was my friend!'

'I'm sorry. He must've been weaker than I -'

'I'm sorry too,' said Blakt.'But not about you. Now - inside!' This last shout was accompanied by a shove between the shoulders and Julya staggered into the airlock. Blakt pulled the door lever and the portal closed.

Automatically Julya launched herself at the doors, banging on the Plexiglas panels with her fists. Blakt's helmet visor stared back at her silent cries for a few seconds and then moved back out of sight. Julya's voice rang out loudly in the confined space, hurting her ears. She stopped calling for help as she felt a cool breeze on the back of her neck.

Behind her the airlock door had slid open very quietly. Beyond it lay blackness, and the cold night air of Janus Prime seeping through the bars that formed the pen. The floor of the pen must be opaque to cut out the light from the sand, she realised. The dim luminescence which pushed through the panels in the doors behind her was not enough to light her way. A strong smell assaulted her - a musty animal smell mixed with something else. Something rotten.

Julya kept her back pressed firmly against the doors leading back into the dome. She wasn't moving from this spot, not for anything. Even the wan rectangles of light by her shoulders were better than nothing.

Then even they faded. Blakt must have switched off the corridor lights. She was in total blackness.

Something began moving towards her.

***

The girl looked Lunder right in the eye as he aimed the ripgun at her head. He found it disconcerting, and it was this simple gesture of defiance that stayed his trigger finger. What good would shooting her really do, anyway? There was real strength in those blue eyes. And pain.

Lunder recognised pain easily enough.

'What's wrong with your arm?' he asked, not lowering the gun.

'I've been shot once already,' said Sam.'Left shoulder.'

Lunder seemed to think for a second and then bolstered the ripgun.'Let's see it.'

Sam was too tired to argue, and too sick with the accumulated fear of the last day. She sank back on her haunches and let the man approach. He smelled of leather and sweat and metal. Somehow, despite the weaponry and the soldier's bearing, she knew he wasn't one of Zemler's men. She knew when he eased back the strap of her vest to look at the wound that he had a gentleness that belied his appearance. She shuddered as the material came away from the wound.

Lunder pulled a face. The flesh of Sam's upper arm was red and sore, the wound burned black. In the centre was a pus-filled hole.

'It's infected,' he told her.

Sam swallowed with difficulty. 'Is that why I feel so ill?'

'Could be.'

'Great. Don't suppose you've got any antibiotics with you?' Sam risked a smile. 'If you haven't, then I'd rather you go ahead and shoot me now.'

Lunder unbuckled his medikit and selected an injector. He pressed it to the exposed flesh just below Sam's collar bone.'I've put a painkiller in with it. You should feel better pretty soon.'

"Thanks. Vigo's worked a treat, so yours should -'

'Vigo?' His eyes flashed in the gloom.'Did you say Vigo?'

'Yes. Did you know him?'

***

Moslei had actually felt sorry to see the Doctor go. He could not explain why, but the man seemed to have more idea of what was going on around here than anyone, including Zemler. He looked at his captain. Zemler had sunk back into his chair, apparently deep in thought. One gloved hand still rested on the white sphere, the fingers rhythmically kneading its surface. Moslei took a deep breath, felt it rattle in the moist lining of his lungs, and said, 'What is it that the Doctor wants to know, sir?'

'Wanted to know, Moslei. Past tense. The Doctor is in the past now.'

For some reason the words 'Time Lord' came into Moslei's mind, but he was careful not to say anything. He felt, on an instinctive level, that both past and future had a very different meaning for the Doctor.

Zemler had not railed to notice his sergeant digging for information, though.'Curious, Moslei?'

'I feel it might be important, sir.'

'It is, Moslei. It is.' Zemler stroked the orb gently. 'It's the most important thing of all - the difference between life and death.'

'Who for, sir?'

' "For whom", Moslei."For whom".' The gurgling voice bubbled with excitement. 'For all of us. For everyone... and everything.'

***

The total darkness disorientated Julya very quickly, but she was sure the noise was coming from directly ahead, right at the back of the pen - scraping, scuttling sounds which made her skin crawl.

Then something touched her.

Just lightly, on the arm.

She didn't scream, but she did whimper. It was purely involuntary as she jerked back against the doors. Then something gripped her by the arm and a voice said, 'Julya! It's me. The Doctor!'

Instantly she sagged, her knees weak and her legs useless. Strong hands held her upright, and she felt herself brought into a warm embrace. She could feel the soft silk of the Doctor's cravat against the skin of her cheek, and the brush of his hair on her head.

'It's all right, I'm here.' He spoke quietly and warmly.

Julya grabbed the crushed velvet of the Doctor's sleeves and held it tightly. 'Where is it? I can't see a thing.'

'Well, there I'm afraid Big Henry will have the advantage. He has eight eyes, remember. We have only four between us.'

A low growl bit through the blackness. A waft of fetid air breezed over them.

'Wait wait wait,' said the Doctor suddenly. Julya could feel his breath against the skin of her forehead.'Have you still got that box of matches I gave you?'

'Yes.' She fumbled in the pocket of her fatigues and, after a momentary fumble, he took the box from her. She heard him rattle it experimentally.

'Only one left?'

'I had to use five to set the fire alarm off.'

The Doctor opened the box and shook out the last match. A moment later it flared into life with a loud rasp. The first thing Julya saw was the

Doctor's long angular features flickering in the darkness. The next thing she saw was something in her peripheral vision, moving quickly out of the light and back into the surrounding darkness.

'What was that?'

'I'm not sure.' The Doctor knelt down, taking his light with him. The match threw a wobbling patch of illumination across the floor. Something retracted quickly into the darkness again.'What's this? I wonder.'

Julya watched him shuffle forward on his knees, reaching out with his tiny flame further into the blackness. His hand was held out to feel something on the ground ahead. Gingerly he picked up what looked like a long wispy thread and held it closer to the match so that he could examine it. 'It's cobweb.'

'Cobweb?'

He stood up.'Interesting. Very interesting.'

Julya didn't find it at all interesting. 'Can't you just use your sonic thing to unlock the doors?'

He held the match up so that she could see his wide blue eyes. 'And not introduce ourselves to Big Henry? That would be very rude.'

'Doctor! I thought you were here to get me out!'

He looked genuinely surprised. 'Really?'

'Yes!'

The Doctor looked abashed. 'Well, I'm terribly sorry, but I was actually thrown in here to die.'

Julya groaned.'I don't believe this.'

'It's true, I promise!' said the Doctor, nodding quickly.'Although it has to be said I didn't put up too much of a fight. I wanted to take a closer look at Big Henry.'

She quickly grabbed his arm as he started to move off into the pen. Actually start walking towards the blackness, and whatever monstrosity

it held.'You can't be serious!'

'If there's one thing I've learned in the past thousand years or so,Julya, it's never to go backwards. Only forwards.' And with that, he walked off into the dark. Julya had no option but to follow. Whatever happened, she felt safer with him than alone. Besides which he had the only light. Clinging on to his arm, she walked slowly forwards with him, the tiny flickering flame held out at arm's length. Only now did she realise that the match had not burnt out yet. The Doctor kicked something in the dirt and he lowered the match to investigate. A long white bone lay by his shoe.

'Human femur,' he said.'Someone's been this way before.'

'How reassuring,' said Julya. 'I bet they wishedthey'd gone backwards instead of forwards.'

The Doctor gave her a reproving look and moved on.

Things were moving all around them, just beyond the range of the Doctor's light. They could hear the scuttling sound of many legs and the movement of bodies across the ground. Presently something brushed past Juhya's face and she jolted back with a gasp. The Doctor steadied her and held the flame up higher so that it illuminated a piece of fibrous grey material hanging from the ceiling.'More cobweb,' he muttered.'It's all around us.'

'And there's something else in here,' whispered Julya. 'Something other than Henry.'

'Yes, I get that feeling too. I wonder...' Suddenly the Doctor dropped to his haunches and thrust his match out further. In the jittery glow they saw several spiders the size of small dogs scurry back into the gloom. Their legs and bodies were pallid, almost translucent, the eight tiny red eyes like little drops of blood.

'Now I understand,' hissed the Doctor as he slowly stood up.'In most arachnid species, the female is generally much larger than the male. I don't think we've stepped into Big Henry's parlour at all... it's more likely to be Big Henrietta!'

A terrible numbness flooded through Julya. 'You mean he's... she's... these are her babies?'

'Undoubtedly.' The Doctor was warming to his subject, apparently oblivioqs to Julya's fear. "This debris must be all that's left of the egg sac. The babies must be postembryo hatchlings, which is lucky for us.'

'Why?'

'Because the hatchlings will very quickly grow into spiderlings, which is when they get hungry. Usually they eat each other -survival of the fittest and all that - but they might prefer easier meat if there's some available.' He smiled. "That's us, by the way.'

The Doctor held up the flickering match light and Julya peered into the gloom beyond. Perhaps her eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness, because she could make something out now - something very large and covered with a coarse brown fur. The match reflected redly in eight big black eyes as it emitted a low snarl.

'Big Henrietta herself,' said the Doctor softly.

Chapter Thirteen
Thanks for the Memory

Locked into a pattern of behaviour dictated by the computer program now controlling it, the spidroid homed in on the beta-nine transmission in minutes. Even in the ruins and against the background radiation, it stood out like a beacon in the night.

The cyborg made its way through the ruins at a much faster pace than Varko and his comrades, but they weren't concerned. The creature had been instructed to locate and kill the girl; they would merely arrive in time to pick up the pieces. Varko told his men to concentrate on avoiding sniper fire: somewhere in the ruins was a Mendan with a ripgun who was still picking them off one by one.

They found Tisnel - or rather his spacesuit - two minutes later. It was spread-eagled in the dirt, a massive tear in the silvery carbidium material of the suit at chest level. Varko gently pressed the toe of his boot into the corpse's side and watched the liquid remains ooze out of the gash. Now he was down to just five men and the spidroid.

'Varko!' called one of the troopers through the helmet comm. "The spidroid's found 'em!'

***

'Quiet,' snapped Lunder, clamping his hand over Sam's open mouth. They both lay still, listening. Faintly, over the sound of her heart beating faster and faster, Sam heard the familiar noise of a giant spider approaching - but the sound was mixed with something else: an electronic clicking and bleeping growing louder and louder.

Lunder moved silently to the doorway, unslinging his ripgun. He peered round, then turned back to Sam.

'Spidroid. It's coming for us.'

Sam clambered to her feet, a little unsteadily. She didn't know how much further she could run. She watched Lunder pump a round into the firing chamber of his gun, preparing to fight.

'Back way,' she said."There's a back way out.'

Lunder turned to see her pointing at a low opening in a rear corner of the room, barely large enough for him to crawl through on all fours. He glanced back out at the street. The spidroid was much closer now, its legs dancing in the rapid crawling manner he had come to despise and fear.

Lunder's painkiller had taken the fire out of Sam's shoulder. Now, driven by her instinct for survival, she dived into the tunnel and scrambled forward. Lunder followed a second later.

This makes a change, thought Sam. Normally the narrow enclosed spaces she had to crawl through were dark as well, but this one was lined widi glowing sand and as bright as day. She could hear Lunder close behind her. What a fine view he must have now.

The tunnel was shorter than she had expected. It led into a darkened space so that the end of the tunnel was actually a black rectangle. Weird. With a heave she dragged herself out of the other end and got to her feet. Lunder stood up beside her, his guns and equipment scraping on the stone. It seemed unnaturally loud in here. They were in a small bare cell roughly three metres square.

'Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time,' said Sam as they looked around the gloomy confines of the room. Lunder snapped on a flashlight and swept the walls and ceiling with the beam.

'The Doctor said the spider people used to live in these ruins,' said Lunder,'but I can't think what they used this place for.'

'The Doctor - you've seen him?'

Lunder looked at her. 'Yes,' he said, in a way Sam couldn't quite fathom. His face looked stony in the light from the torch. 'Last time I saw him he was being taken away by Zemler's men. He paused. 'Because you'd led them to him.'

'I'd led them?'

'How else did they know where to find him? And Julya?'

'But -'

'Shh. Listen.' Lunder held up a hand for quiet. Presently they heard voices echoing along the tunnel leading from the room they had just fled.

'Soldiers. They're right behind us.'

Sam bit her lip.'We've got to get out of here.'

'Bright, aren't you?"

'Bright enough to know we're safe for the time being at least. The spidroid can't even get in to the entrance, and the soldiers won't be able to come through that tunnel wearing spacesuits.' Sam smiled sweetly at him.

'All right,' said Lunder.'You've bought us a little time. How long do you think it will take them to think of shooting a grenade in here?'

'Would they do that?'

'I would.' Lunder knelt by the entrance to the tunnel and pointed his gun inside. 'Which is why I'm going to do it first.' He pulled the trigger, and they heard the blast as the explosive projectile emerged at the other end. It was impossible to tell what damage had been done.

Sam was about to protest but her words were drowned out by the noise of another blast. Lunder fired again and the room reverberated with the noise of the subsequent detonation. A stream of dust fell from the ceiling into Sam's hair.

'Stop it!' she yelled, looking up.With the aid of the flashlight she could see a large crack in the ceiling. Dust and bits of brickwork were falling from it. 'Stop shooting! You'll bring the whole lot down on us!'

As they watched, more dust and stonework crumbled from the crack as it widened and spread. Lumps of masonry started to fall to the floor accompanied by clouds of dust. The whole ceiling was on the point of collapse.

Suddenly realisation came to him. 'It's not the shooting. Something's trying to force its way in.'

Sam dodged sideways as a heavy lump of stone broke free and thudded into the ground where she had been standing. The dust threw up a misty

curtain across her vision, but not enough to prevent her seeing the huge legs of a giant spider pushing their way through the resultant gap. More brickwork and dust fell away as the hole widened and the monster dug through the ceiling.

'Guess who's coming to dinner,' said Sam.

***

In the flickering light of the Doctor's match, the spider's huge black eyes seemed to move in their sockets and focus on both him and Julya. This close to it they could hear the creature's harsh breathing and smell the rank odour of its body.

'Why isn't it moving?' Julya asked in no more than a fearful whisper.

'She's probably exhausted,' explained the Doctor, equally quietly.'Some adult female spiders can lay upwards of a thousand eggs.'

'A thousand!'Julya squirmed at the thought of so many of the pale white spiderlings hiding in the darkness around them.

'The mortality rate is usually high. But even so...' The Doctor lowered his match. Along the edges of the sphere of light it threw out were the thick finger-like legs of a number of infant spiders. They were coming closer, investigating the unaccustomed brightness, testing it. Unharmed, they were getting braver. One darted forward and ran over the Doctor's foot.

Julya dug her ringers into the Doctor's arm. Hard. She felt his hand close over her own, but his fingers were terribly cold. Then she watched, perplexed, as he transferred his match from one hand to the other without removing his clammy grip on her own. With a cry, she snatched her hand away and watched the spiderling that had been sitting on it fly away into the shadows.

The Doctor turned sharply to look at her, and then froze when he realised that there was another spiderling on his shoulder.

'T-turn around,'Julya said.

The Doctor turned slowly around.

Julya sighed with relief. The back of his coat was bare. 'It's all right. I

thought there might be more on your back.'

'That's a relief,' said the Doctor as he turned back. Three spiderlings sat on his chest, one of them crawling up his left lapel towards his face. Julya's hand flew to her mouth. She could see the things clearly now - corpse-white bodies covered in a fine downy hair, eyes glinting like tiny rubies. Their legs were like long bony fingers gently probing the Doctor's waistcoat and cravat.

The Doctor stood stock still. The topmost spiderling touched the flesh of his throat with the tip of its foreleg.

'Take this,' said the Doctor, slowly passing the lighted match to Julya. 'I don't want to panic them.'

There were more of them crawling up his body now. Julya counted a dozen easily, clinging on to his clothes, hanging off his coat. More appeared over his shoulders. The uppermost now had its legs buried in his hair. Gingerly Julya took the proffered match with trembling fingers, too scared even to speak.

And then she dropped it.

Her fingers had been trembling too much. The tiny flame flickered to the ground and began to gutter. She tried to retrieve it but it was too late: the glowing orange head suddenly faded and died. The last thing she saw before the darkness closed in was the Doctor completely covered in crawling spiders from head to foot.

***

'Out of the way!' roared Lunder, shouldering Sam to the floor. He aimed the ripgun straight up and fired point-blank into the gap where the spidroid was forcing its way in. There was a sharpcrump as the fléchette went off and a shower of bright sparks. The creature squealed and backed off. Lunder fired again, and this time the shot blew a larger portion of the roof away and they were suddenly exposed to the night sky.

Framed in the wreckage of the ceiling and lit by the light from Lunder's torch was the spidroid. Pieces of metal and plastic wiring hung from a large blackened hole in its head, but it was still alive. Lunder aimed carefully and fired six rounds into the monster's gaping mouth. A series

of explosions tore through its head, throat and body, each blast propelling it further backwards. Pieces of charred flesh and machinery rained down into the room.

'Come on!' He pulled Sam to her feet.'Up, while we've got the chance!'

Sam planted her foot in the stirrup formed by Lunder's hands. With a grunt he heaved her upward and out of the hole in the roof. Then he leapt after her, catching the edge of the crumbling masonry. Sam grabbed his wrists, but he was way too heavy for her to pull him up. Her fingers didn't even meet around the thick wrists. She watched the sinews in his arms tighten and then bulge as he hauled himself clear of the drop by brute strength alone.

They both collapsed side by side next to the smouldering remains of the spidroid. Sparks continued to fizz and flash inside the shredded flesh.

'Scratch one ugly mother -'

'I knew you were going to say something like that,' panted Sam. 'I just knew it.'

Lunder helped her up with a lopsided grin. ''Then I guess you'll know what else I'm going to say: we can't wait here any longer. There may be more spidroids, and there'll certainly be more soldiers. Let's go.'

Sam felt a little dizzy, but then she hadn't eaten in twenty-four hours and she was fighting an infection. Whatever the reason, she was grateful for the strong arm he lent her as they traversed the remains of the rooftop and then climbed down a broken wall to the glowing ground. A sudden wave of nausea made her pause there.

'What's up?'

'I'm OK. It'll pass...' She doubled up and wretched violently,but there was nothing to bring up. 'God,' she gasped. 'I've come halfway across the galaxy to get Spanish Tummy.'

'Come on!' Lunder grabbed her by the hand and yanked her after him.

***

Julya sat in total darkness. For some reason the spiderlings had not

come near her, but for that she was truly thankful. So she had just sat slowly down and hugged her knees close to her body and cried for the Doctor.

Why had the spiderlings gone only for him? Gradually her eyes were getting used to the dark, and perhaps picking up the faintest of light from the distant glow of the sun's corona as it peeked around the edges of Janus Prime's moon, she was able to pick out the shape of the Doctor as he lay on the ground in front of her. If she peered hard she thought she could see the pale shapes of the spiderlings covering his body and face. She tried not to look too closely.

Instead she listened for the sounds of the creatures feeding on him. Presumably they had dug their fangs into his flesh so that they could inject their venomous digestive juices into his body. Once his insides had been turned into so much soup they could suck him dry, leaving only a translucent husk behind. She shut her eyes to block out the image, but the result was the same: blackness, cold and unforgiving, and an ache in her head like someone drilling into her brain.

Perhaps it was the start of the radiation sickness.

***

Sam let Lunder drag her through the ruins and out into the open plains beyond. The sky was immense and black, encapsulating the vast expanse of luminescent sand dunes, with only a few stars visible and one giant moon blocking off the sunlight. It was one of the strangest worlds she had ever visited, alien in a way not even Skaro or Hirath had been.

'Where are we going?' she asked Lunder eventually.

'First we have to put as much distance between us and the enemy as possible,' he replied. "Then we rest up and decide what to do next.'

Sam said,'I like the sound of the bit where we rest up.'

They walked deep into the dunes until they were out of sight of the ruined city. Sam collapsed in a grateful heap in the sand when Lunder finally halted. She watched him walk over to a boulder and sit down rather stiffly.

'What's up with your leg?' she asked. 'You've been limping for the last mile.'

Lunder squeezed the flesh of his left thigh and grimaced. 'Souvenir from my last visit. Acid burn. The jump from the tunnel must've torn it open again.'

Sam pulled a face.'Looks like we've both been in the wars, then.'

He looked at her. 'We may not be out of it yet. I still haven't worked out how that spidroid found us in the ruins. They're smart in their way, but not psychic. It almost seemed to smell us there.'

'That's my fault,' said Sam.'I just haven't had a chance for a wash yet.'

Lunder didn't smile.'Why don't you tell me exactly what you're doing here,' he said.'and what happened to Vigo?'

***

'Julya?'

Julya jerked out of her meditative daze at the voice in her ear. It was impossible.'Doctor?'

'Yes, it's me. Back from the dead - don't worry, it happens all the time.'

She couldn't see him in the dark but she could tell, despite the flippancy, that he wasn't all right. His voice was quiet and a little shaky.'Where are you?'he asked.

'Over here. Why?'

'Because I think I'm going to faint...'

After a moment's blind fumbling they found each other. Julya hugged the Doctor tightly, and felt his sudden weight. 'What happened? All those baby spiders -'

'Took quite a... shine to me, yes.'

'Here, let me help you sit down. There.'Julya kept hugging him close to her, frightened to find him so weak.'What happened?'

'Chat... Had a little chat. That's all.'

'I don't understand.'

'Not sure I do, either.' The Doctor gave a little laugh. 'Communication. Some sort of empathic link. The spiderlings still have that capacity, you see. Lose it when... when they become adults.'

'Doctor, take it easy. You're rambling.'

'No,' he said, urgently,'I'm not. Listen, listen: the spiderlings can communicate, after a fashion... I think they use some kind of reduced-frequency alpha wave. Something my brain is able to pick up - in exceptional circumstances.'

'What did they say?'

'Say? They didn't say anything. I didn't mean that they communicate in that sense. But they let me share their... race memory.'

'Race memory?'

The Doctor was climbing to his feet, having regained some of his composure. He spoke quickly: 'I'll explain later. We've got to get out of here, and quickly. I understand what this is all about now.'

'Well I'm glad, because I haven't a clue.'

The Doctor gripped her by the shoulders. Even though she couldn't see him she knew he was staring into her eyes. 'It's the Janus conjunction,' he said. 'If we don't stop it, this planet, Menda and this entire sector of space will be completely destroyed.'

***

Sam finished recounting her adventures on Janus Prime up until the point she had found her way back to the TARDIS, only to find that she was crying. She sniffed loudly and rubbed a hand across her eyes, saying that it must be the smoke. They were sitting close to a small fire Lunder had lit using his laser pistol and a few bits of the dry, thorny plants which grew here and there among the dunes. The twigs burned with a comforting crackle and a small amount of purplish smoke, which

made Sam feel light-headed. She was prodding the embers with a stick as she spoke, watching tiny orange sparks jump into the air and float away on the warm current.

'That settles it, then,' said Lunder.

'What?'

'How the spidroid found us. How Zemler's men trailed you to the Doctor's spaceship. You've been bugged.'

'What are you talking about?'

'When you passed out in Zemler's base, that's when they probably did it.' Lunder tilted his head to look at her. 'Wonder where they put it.'

Sam felt suddenly cold and numb. 'If it was me, I'd've put it in your shoulder.You'd never have noticed with all the damage from the laser shot.' Lunder moved closer to her. 'Let's have a look.'

'I know why you're doing this.' Sam winced as he touched her arm.

'Yeah?'

'To take your mind off Vigo.'

She heard Lunder let out a long cold breath. 'Vigo was a good man. He had friends, lots of friends.'

'I know the type.'

'Here it is. Subcutaneous transmitter, right under the biceps. I can see the scar.'

Sam twisted her neck to try to see, but all she could detect was a small red smudge. It just looked like one more bruise.

'They didn't make a very neat job of it,' Lunder added, 'but I don't suppose they had to.'

'What now, then?'

'If it's still signalling, Zemler's men could find us like that.' Lunder clicked

his fingers. 'It's got to come out.'

***

'It's no use,' snapped the Doctor. 'I can't see a thing.'

They had groped their way back to the airlock leading into the dome, where the Doctor was attempting to open it using his sonic screwdriver.

Julya listened to him make another bad-tempered adjustment to the device and then heard the stridulant whine as he aimed it at the lock - or where he thought the lock might be.

'Of course, it may be immune to sonic wavelengths,' he muttered. The screwdriver clicked off. 'I could convert it into a miniature saser lance, of course...'

'Saser?'

'Sound Amplified by the Stimulated Emission of Radiation.'

'There's no such thing.'

'Give me time, give me time...' the Doctor worked feverishly in the dark for several seconds.

'Doctor, I don't wish to rush you but I think the natives are getting restless.' Julya could hear scuttling noises from the shadows around them as the spiderlings crept closer.

'Nearly there.' There was a series of rapid clicks as the Doctor completed his adjustments and then a shrill, ear-popping sound that made Jutya's teeth ache.'Got it,' he hissed triumphantly.'Now I can use the sonic screwdriver to cut the lock right out of the door.'

'How long will that take?'

'Couple of hours, max.'

Julya was aghast. 'Hours? I coulddig our way out faster.'

'Right then,' he replied tartly. 'I'll race you.'

***

With a metallic rasp Lunder drew the sharp little dagger from its scabbard in his boot. The blade was about four inches long, blackened for night use and razor sharp.

'Bloody hell,' said Sam. She watched nervously as Lunder wiped the blade with a sterilised swab from his medical kit. What was the point of that? Her gunshot wound was already infected.

As he moved towards her, Sam shook her head.'No.'

'It's got to come out,' Lunder insisted. 'Now.'

'Then let me do it.' Sam held out her hand for the knife. After only a moment's hesitation, Lunder gave it to her. It was surprisingly heavy, and it had a rubberised handle, which was lucky because her hands were slippery with sweat. As she tightened her grip on the knife, fresh perspiration sprang to the surface of her entire body. She could feel it with unnatural clarity - a single droplet running from her scalp down her face and jaw, then her throat, then down into the material of her vest.

'Tell me about Vigo,' she said. She wanted something to take her mind off what she was about to do.

Lunder stared at her, seemed to be weighing up in his mind whether she'd have the bottle to do this. Thinking maybe that she was little more than a kid.'You sure about this?'

'I said... tell me about Vigo,' repeated Sam as she carefully placed the sharp tip of the knife against the flesh of her upper arm. The metal felt deliciously cool against her fever-hot skin.

'Um,' said Lunder. 'Vigo was... I guess he was my friend. There aren't many people I can call friends. Only him and Julya, I suppose.'

Sam cautiously dug the tip of the blade into the skin next to the small lump where the tracer had been implanted. She was rewarded with a sharp flash of pain.'Go on,' she hissed. A tiny red bead of blood appeared at the knifepoint.

'He was good, Vigo - picked up things quick. But he shouldn't have volunteered for the mission. It meant that he would spend too long here,

risk the radiation poisoning. And he had too many people on Menda who liked him.'

Sam held her breath as she pushed the tip of the blade in by about half a centimetre. The blood ran down her arm in a single quick red line which tickled her wrist.

'Funny, isn't it? Vigo had all the friends, the loved ones back on Menda. I had no one. Yet I was the one who got to go back and tell everyone the good news.'

'Wasn't... your... fault.' Sam grunted. She could feel the blade scraping against the implant, but it wasn't in deep enough to prise it out.

'That's a matter of opinion,' Lunder replied bitterly. He watched Sam's lips compress into a thin white line. The knife was in about a centimetre now, her arm streaked red with blood and sweat. The skin was bulging over the implant as she levered it up with the blade. Lunder wasn't sure if she was even listening to him now, but he couldn't watch in silence. He said, 'I trained Vigo. If he made a mistake then it wasmy mistake.'

Sam could see it now, a silvery glint in the blood where the corner of the implant was poking out. She felt ludicrously detached. Just another few millimetres would do it. She pressed down on the knife hilt, hardly able to feel it her fingers were so numb, only aware of the burning hot pain where the blade was slicing through the flesh of her arm. She wished she had something to bite on; her teeth were clenched so hard she felt sick.

'I liked Vigo,' whispered Lunder.'Everyone did. He had that way about him: funny, always laughing. Very popular. Now he's gone... somany people on Menda are gonna miss him. I guess that's why I came back here, really: I knew he was probably dead already, but at least if I was on Janus Prime I wasn't on Menda with all his friends and relatives. And if I die here, there's no one left behind to care.'

With a final agonising jerk the implant came out. Sam let out a low groan, dropped the knife and clamped her hand over the cut as fresh blood gushed out.

Lunder quickly picked up the tracer. It looked like nothing more than a thin strip of metal about a centimetre long. He put it on the nearest rock and crushed it under the heel of his boot.

'You all right?' he asked.

Sam smiled unconvincingly.'Never better,' she said.

Then she threw up.

***

Zemler held up the ball for Moslei to see.'Do you know what this is, Sergeant?'

Moslei said that he didn't. But he could see it more clearly now. It wasn't a skull. It wasn't entirely spherical either. It was more like an egg. There was a smaller lump appended to it, in which a number of vestigial stumps wriggled frantically.

Oh God. It was alive.

And then Moslei did realise what it was. The moving parts were all that remained of eight long legs. Zemler must have removed them to prevent the spiderling escaping.

'It's a key,' Zemler said simply. 'To unlock that.'

He pointed at the blue column rising from the central pit. As he raised the spiderling towards it, the column hummed softly.

Chapter Fourteen
Return to Menda

'Do you have snags in the twenty-third century?' asked the Doctor.

'Snags?'

'Only I've just hit one.'

Julya heard the drilling whine of the sonic screwdriver die away as the Doctor straightened up. She couldn't see him in the dark, but she could tell he must look disgruntled.

'The locking plate is lined with barydium,' explained the Doctor. 'I won't even burn halfway through before the screwdriver's power supply is exhausted.'

'Which means we're stuck here,' stated Julya.

'Which means we're stuck here, yes.'

'With a thousand eight-legged snags getting hungrier by the minute.'

It was difficult to know how much time had passed since the spiderlings had relinquished their hold on the Doctor, but in the last half-hour at least they had both heard signs of vigorous activity in the shadows around them. The Doctor had said that, while the spiderlings were busy with each other, they wouldn't bother the intruders in their nest, but the thought of literally hundreds of the things growing nastier and more aggressive by the moment made Julya's blood run cold.

'One of them must have found a way out of here,' the Doctor mused. 'Zemler found it. I didn't realise it at the time, but that's how he must have accessed the Janusian control column. Alpha waves, you see. That's what's giving you your headache.'

Jutya blinked. How did he know she had a headache? 'But if a spiderling got out...?'

'No hope for us, I'm afraid: we're just too big.'

'Then what are we going to do? Wait until these things realise we're still

here and have us for breakfast?'

'It might be an idea to make yourself look as inedible as possible,' suggested the Doctor.

***

The base dome stood in a natural basin ringed by dunes. There were low craggy hills in the distance forming a jagged glowing line against the blackness of the sky.

The patrol shuttle stood on a flat area near to the dome, tended by a couple of troopers in spacesuits. On the opposite side of the dome, and attached to it, was a square-shaped structure made up of tightly meshed bars.

'We need to take out the two guys by the door,' said Lunder quietly.

Sam adjusted the zoom control on the binoculars, focusing on the two men guarding the dome's entrance runnel. They both carried laser rifles.

She and Lunder were lying atop one of the higher dunes overlooking the dome. Shortly after she had recovered her senses - and that was positively the last time she was going to lose consciousness on this hole of a planet - Lunder had suggested they both attempt to escape back to Menda.

'You need proper medical attention,' he had told her as he tightened the field dressing around her arm. 'Before it's too late. And we need to regroup, decide what to do next.'

'No way,' Sam had replied as the colour - or at least what was left of it - returned to her face. 'I'm not leaving without the Doctor.'

Lunder had been expecting this reaction, and was glad of it. He remained unmoved by the Doctor's fate, but the thought of Julya held prisoner in Zemler's HQ was enough to make him unwilling to argue the point. And this girl had already proved she was tough enough not to be a liability. 'Know how to use one of these?' he asked, offering her his laser pistol.

She didn't take it.'Guns aren't my style, I'm afraid.'

Lunder shrugged.'I can tell you're the Doctor's girl all right.'

'Good,' said Sam, simply. She wouldn't leave Janus Prime until she was reunited with the Doctor. Right now he was bound to be up to his wing collar in trouble and would need her help. Besides which she couldn't help feeling guilty that she'd led the enemy straight to him and the TARDIS in the first place. But Sam Jones believed in correcting mistakes, not lamenting them.

So they had moved cautiously through the ruins to Zemler's base, sharing Lunder's rations and water along the way. Sam felt too ill to eat properly, but she also knew that it would be foolish to ignore the chance. She needed all her strength. Another painkilling shot had taken away all but the worst pain in her arm and shoulder; she could deal with the long-term effects later.

'If you take out the guards on the door, the men by the shuttle will see you.' Sam indicated the spacesuited figures skulking around the patrol ship.

'Then I'll deal with them first,' replied Lunder.'Just do your bit, OK?'

'You'll get your distraction,' she promised.

Lunder acknowledged this with a nod and then crawled back down the dune in order to circle wide into position. Sam watched him go with a mixture of excitement and trepidation, nervously fingering the ripgun in her hands. It felt uncomfortable and heavy. With a sigh, she picked up the binocs again and focused on the men guarding the shuttle. Seconds later she saw Lunder approaching.

Using the aft landing skid as cover, Lunder was able to sprint from the relative safety of the outlying dunes right up to the shuttle without being seen. Crouched by the thick metal pad of the skid, he could see the first of Zemler's guards standing barely three metres away. Beyond him was the second, armed with a powerful slicer gun. Both men had their backs to Lunder.

If he killed these two quickly, he could use the slicer to take out the men guarding the entrance to the dome. But he would have to be fast, silent and accurate.

He drew the boot knife and stepped out behind the first guard, wrapping

his arm around the collar of the spacesuit and thrusting the knife as hard as he could between the armoured plastrons which covered the man's ribs. He spasmed, but Lunder kept his grip until the blade did its work and the trooper slumped, dead, to the ground.

Immediately, the second guard began to turn around, alerted by the commotion in his peripheral vision. But Lunder already had the knife out and his arm back, ready to throw. The blade flashed across the intervening space and thudded into the junction of the spacesuit collar and chestplate. The bulk of its momentum robbed by the spacesuit, the blade barely penetrated the silvery material. But the impact was sufficient to make the trooper lurch backwards, clutching at the protruding knife.

Lunder was on him in an instant, ramming the blade home with the palm of his hand on the hilt. The blade found its mark in the soft flesh of the man's throat and seconds later he joined his fellow trooper face down in the glowing sand.

There was no time to rest. Lunder picked up the slicer gun, checked it was charged, and put it to his shoulder. The computer-sighting mechanism whirred quietly as he aimed at the troopers standing by the dome. They were already moving, bringing their own weapons up to bear, aiming at him.

Two quick bursts was all it took, the narrow green beam flickering across the gap between them in a thousandth of a second. It cut the first guard almost in half and decapitated the second, helmet and all.

Sam blinked as the electrobinoculars picked up the plasma beam and the guards fell. No time to feel sorry for them; that was her cue. She shifted her position, bringing the ripgun to her hip as instructed by Lunder. It was fully loaded and primed - all she had to do was pull the trigger.

It kicked back hard, and the flechette went high, too high for her to follow it. Four seconds later she heard the round explode on the far side of the base. She fired again, and waited for the noise of its detonation. This time she saw a flash of orange over the rim of the dome.

***

Julya jumped at the noise of the first explosion, grabbing the Doctor

when she saw him in the brief yellow glare. He looked equally startled.

'Gunfire,' he said.

There was an excited scrabble around the pen as the spiderlings went into a frenzy with the second explosion.

'What's going on?'

The Doctor's face flickered orange in the light of a third blast. This one was closer, louder, and he looked strangely frightened, almost panicky.

'The spiderlings - they're scared,' he gasped, clutching hold of Julya for support. 'I'm still on their alpha-wave frequency... I'm picking up all their feelings.'

Another explosion, even closer. Juh/a felt a hot wind blow across her face, glimpsed the Doctor's tangle of hair fluttering in its wake. His eyes were wide, terrified. She hugged him tighter as the spiderlings started to race around the pen, climbing over each other and the bars in a tangle of legs.

At the back of the cage, Big Henrietta began to stir.

***

Lunder heard the ripgun shots going off on the far side of the dome, right on cue. Every head in the base would be turned that way now. He ran down the entrance tunnel and used the slicer gun to cut through the doors, not even bothering to check if they were locked. They fell apart, dribbling molten steel.

Sam had briefed him on as much of the layout of the base as she could recall. He reckoned on rinding the detention cell easily enough if her directions were true.

***

This was easy enough, thought Sam. Just lie back and pull the trigger. The ripgun thudded against her hip, and a few seconds later she heard the explosive result. It was quite satisfying in a way, so long as she knew she wasn't doing anybody any harm.

Just a distraction, that's all.

Lunder was the one doing the harm.

Another pang of nausea swept through her, making her feel dizzy. She gripped the gun harder, almost trying to steady herself with it. Just keep firing, Lunder had told her. Shift your aim slightly every few shots so that the damage is spread around, keep them guessing.

***

The fléchette struck the top of the spider pen, drew sparks, exploded. There were threads of cobweb below, which immediately caught fire. The burning wisps dropped to the bottom of the cage, igniting the detritus covering the ground. Within a few seconds a flickering orange glow illuminated the back of the pen, silhouetting the giant female spider. Her long thick legs uncurled, heaving her body off the floor and away from the sudden heat. The spiderlings were still racing around in confusion.

'No!' cried the Doctor, cowering against the airlock door.'Stop it! Make it stop!'

Another explosive round went off, this one directly overhead. They both felt the pressure blast and several spiderlings erupted in flames. The Doctor reacted as if he had been slapped across the face.'We're under attack!'

A ball of fire dropped from the ceiling above them and ran into the shadows on eight blackened legs. The spiderling clambered on top of a pile of its siblings as it died, setting fire to some of them. Oily smoke filled the air, and for the first time Julya could see the entire pen lit by the crackling flames. Hundreds of spiderlings ran back and forth, popping and crisping in the heat, their legs curling up as they burned to death. At the far end was Big Henrietta, her huge bulk smouldering in several places. She was barely able to move in the confines of the pen, but, panicked by the flames and the screams of her children, she was starting to bash against the bars. They rattled as she hurled herself back and forth, spiderlings running up her legs and across her body. Some were shaken loose, others crushed. Many were simply charred husks.

The Doctor had covered his ears with his hands but the look of pain on his face was still there. He crouched down, rocking on his heels next to

the airlock 'No!' he screamed.'No!'

He began to punch the airlock door, his fist clanging against the metal as he shouted. The blows left no mark at all.

A shadow fell over him and Julya.

Julya spun round to face the giant spider. She could see the glint of the flames reflecting in her eyes and the look in those eyes was instantly recognisable - fear and fury. With sudden cold terror Julya realised what was about to happen. She grabbed the Doctor and hauled him aside as the huge arachnid hurled herself at the dome. The airlock door cracked and buckled under the weight of the onslaught. Her forelegs began to scrabble at the twisted metal, pushing through the widening gap in a desperate effort to escape. The doors started to bend out of shape with a metallic screech.

The Doctor grasped Jutya's hand and pulled her towards the gap.Julya felt the coarse hairs of the Janusian's legs brush her face as they squeezed past the rampaging creature and squirmed through the half-open airlock. They fell in a pile on to the floor of the airlock chamber. The Doctor reached up and wrenched down the lever that operated the doors leading into the dome proper. He pushed Julya through the opening just as the airlock doors finally gave behind him and Big Henrietta burst through. He was knocked off his feet by the impact and thrown into the corridor on top of Julya. The dome wall bulged inward, creaking as the massive Janusian tried to follow them both through the tiny gap.

***

Lunder moved through the dome unimpeded. Zemler's men were all too busy investigating the explosive disturbances on the base's blind side.

He heard the commotion first, and as he sprinted around the bend in the corridor he almost fell over Julya and the Doctor. The passageway was full of acrid smoke, but he could see the pair of them sprawled in a heap on the floor, staring in horror at something opposite them. Even in the semidarkness, Lunder could easily see the eight burning black eyes jammed into a doorway twisted all out of shape. Fangs dripped acid as they snapped hungrily at the two recumbent figures.

Lunder raised the slicer gun and fired. The beam cut deep into the

Janusian's encephalothorax, right in the middle of the eye group. The creature squealed and tried to retreat but it was wedged between the steel bulkhead stanchions. Trapped. Lunder swung the plasma beam across the snarling head until it finally cleaved the monster's brain in two. With a final shuddering gasp the spider sank to the floor, dead.

Lunder was about to help Julya up when the Doctor grabbed him by the collar and threw him against the wall.

'Why?' he cried.'Why? Why?'

Lunder knocked the Doctor's hands aside. Breathing hard, he pointed at the smoking remains jammed between the bulkhead doors."That thing was going to kill you, you ungrateful -'

Anger flared in the Doctor's eyes. 'Thatthing was simply trying to save itself! It was terrified and in pain!'

'I'm here to rescue you!' insisted Lunder, hardly able to believe what he was hearing.

'Doctor, calm down!' shouted Julya. She held his face in her hands and made him look at her. 'You're still thinking like the spiderlings. It's over!'

'No, it's not over. It'll never be over while there are still people likehim -' the Doctor jabbed a finger at Lunder - 'using death and destruction to achieve their aims.' Gradually his breathing became less ragged and his shoulders slumped.'That's how all this started, Julya. Fighting. War. Weaponry. Then the final weapon, the ultimate weapon...'

He looked from one to the other, frowning as if he couldn't comprehend why they didn't understand.'Don't you see? It's still here, waiting to be used. Zemler's going to set the Janus conjunction in motion. He'll destroy everything unless we stop him.'

'What's the Janus conjunction?' asked Lunder, looking to Julya as if expecting her to explain.

The Doctor said, 'Time for explanations later. We've got to get out of here - some idiot is shooting incendiary rounds into the spider pen.'

'That'll be your friend, Sam,' Lunder told him.

A look of desolate horror filled the Doctor's long face.'Sam? Oh, Sam...'

'She'll be outside waiting for us,' Lunder said pointedly.'I told her to secure the shuttle.' He beckoned to Julya and turned to leave.

With a last sad look at Big Henrietta's corpse, the Doctor followed them.

***

She had hit something combustible. The flames were visible now, a pall of dark smoke rising like an amorphous balloon over the rear of the dome. Sam felt a sudden fear open up in her stomach like a chasm. Instantly she stopped firing. Sam always made a point of trusting her instincts. What if she had hit someone? What if the fire spread inside the dome?

The ripgun was hot, too hot to hold. She dropped it, feeling sick.

***

'What is happening?' snarled Zemler. The sound of alarm klaxons echoed around the darkened chamber as he turned to Moslei for an answer.

The sergeant consulted the communications net via his helmet. 'There's been a series of explosions inside the defence perimeter. The men are responding now. The Mendans must've launched an attack...'

'Don't be stupid,' gurgled Zemler. "They haven't the wit or the resources for an all-out assault.'

'Then what...?'

'Zemler's eyes narrowed.You're positive the Doctor was thrown to the spiders?'

'I saw it myself,' said Moslei.

Zemler held up the mutilated spiderling in one hand, its residual legs clawing at the air. The mouth opened and it mewled silently. 'Something is affecting this creature,' Zemler said. 'Check the spider pen.'

***

As they passed the door marked RESTRICTED ACCESS, the Doctor called out for Lunder and Julya to stop. Lunder opened his mouth to protest at the delay, but the Doctor had already stepped into the communications control room.

When they joined him he was sitting at a control station, the monitor lit and his fingers tapping away at the keyboard.

'What are you doing?' Lunder demanded, eager to move on. He stood half in the doorway and half in the corridor, slicer gun primed and ready.

'I'm accessing the main computer control system for the spidroids,' said the Doctor quickly. "They are all slaved to this CPU. If I can bypass the command subroutines and disengage the cybernetic control functions.

'You'll destroy them?'

'No,' said the Doctor firmly.'I shall free them.'

Lunder gritted his teeth in frustration.'We haven't time for this,' he growled.

'There,' said the Doctor, tapping the last key with a flourish. All the VDU monitors flashed and then went blank.'Every remaining spidroid is free of computer control, save for essential autonomic functions. Returned to the wild, you might say.'

He stood up and pushed past Lunder, saying, 'You can make it permanent if you destroy the control station. Give you a chance to use your big gun again.'

The Doctor slipped away with Julya in tow. Lunder glanced back at the communications unit and fired from the hip, blasting the computers and data banks into metal and plastic slag.

'Smart arse,' he muttered.

***

Sam left the ripgun in the dirt and slip-slid down the dune, kicking up clouds of luminous dust around her trainers. She was panting by the time she reached the bottom. All she had to do now was get to the

shuttle. Lunder had dealt with both the guards.

Dealt with. How easily she had slipped that euphemism in! Lunder hadkilled the guards. She wondered how she would feel when she saw the bodies, and then decided that she couldn't feel any sicker than she felt now. Only one thing was going to make her feel any better now - the sight of the Doctor. God, how she wanted to see his face, his straggly hair, his smile. How she wanted to feel the soft green velvet of his coat.

She neared the shuttle, caught a glimpse of two silver-clad bodies in the sand. Quickly she skirted around them and ran up the ramp that led to the cockpit.

***

'The firing's stopped,' realised Lunder.

'Of course it has,' said the Doctor. His eyes were wide but not innocent. They held something of the look that Lunder recalled vividly from outside the council chambers on Menda. It felt almost spooky that the explosions had stopped the moment the Doctor found out it was Sam using the ripgun.

'It's just Sam,' he said simply.'Guns aren't her style.'

They had reached the entrance to the front of the dome. Lying in the sand outside were the empty spacesuits of the guards Lunder had dispatched with the plasma rifle. The sand had soaked up their liquefied remains leaving large dark stains by the rents in their suits.

By the shuttle were the bodies of two more troopers, although the damage to these was less evident. The Doctor knelt quickly by both, his fingers searching for the fatal wounds.

'They're dead,' said Lunder. 'I killed them."

'I don't doubt it. I'm just checking the degree of cellular dissemination.'

'Why?'

'It could be important if we want to find a cure.'

'They're dead. There is no cure.'

The Doctor stood up.'There may yet be a way of halting - or even reversing - the destruction of the body's lipids. But we have to know as much as possible about the process from start to finish.'

'We don't have time for autopsies,' snapped Jutya.'If the firing's stopped it won't take long for Zemler's men to realise they've been tricked. Let's go!'

Sam was waiting for them at the top of the shuttle's main boarding ramp. When the Doctor saw her he was aghast - she looked so ill and exhausted, with a purple bruise visible on her white forehead. He dashed over and flung his arms around her, kissing her hair.

'Sam! Sam, Sam, Sam...'

She was glad he didn't ask her if she was all right because she didn't feel in the mood for stupid questions. She settled for squeezing him back with one arm, the crushed velvet of his coat warm beneath her fingers. The other arm simply hurt too much to use now. The Doctor steered Sam into the shuttle with a protective hand, Lunder and Julya crowding in behind them. Julya hit the hatch control as Lunder hurried forward to the cockpit.

The Doctor helped Sam to a bench and fastened her lap strap. 'You're safe now. Don't worry about a thing.'

'I don't feel very well, Doctor.

'Relax. Everything's going to be fine.'

The shuttle's engines growled into life and almost immediately the vessel took to the air. It wobbled dangerously under Lunder's inexpert control and then banked sharply away from the dome. Pink flashes lit the windows as some of Zemler's men opened up with their laser rifles from the ground. Then they were very quickly out of range.

Sam looked at the Doctor and smiled thinly.'So, what did you do on your holidays?'

'This and that. Mostly the other.'

'Where are we going?'

'Away from this place. Away from this planet, hopefully.' The Doctor nodded towards the cockpit where Julya was sitting with Lunder at the controls. 'Our friends here come from a planet called Menda.'

Sam frowned. The Doctor was already examining her wounds with an expert eye, although his expression showed nothing. She jerked away as he touched her shoulder. 'Ouch.'

'Sorry. That looks nasty.'

'It's infected,' she said, almost proudly.

He nodded. 'Badly. But it's nothing we can't make better when we reach Menda.'

Sam let her head sink back against the wall. The motion of the shuttle in flight was making her feel nauseous again. "This other planet... is it far?'

'Quite far, yes. But we know a short cut.'

Sam closed her eyes. 'I'm glad about that.' Her voice was very quiet and there was a sheen of perspiration on her lace. The Doctor checked her pulse and found it to be slightly raised, probably as a result of the infection. Even so she looked a lot worse than she should.

'Doctor,' she said without opening her eyes. He leaned forward so that he could hear her over the rumble of the shuttle's engines. 'I had to use the gun... I caused trouble, didn't I?'

He rested a cool hand on her forehead. 'Don't worry about anything, Sam,' he told her softly. 'Don't worry.'

The shuttle started to descend and the Doctor caught a glimpse of the ruins rushing past the view slits as Lunder brought the craft in for a hurried touchdown. Sam felt the shift in balance and opened her eyes.

'You'd better brace yourself,' the Doctor informed her.

'For the landing?'

'No, for the short cut to Menda. It's a little unsettling, I understand.'

'Great; Sam smiled faintly.'Perfect end to a perfect day.'

***

When they emerged from the link on Menda, the transference proved too much for Sam and she collapsed, with much complaint, into the Doctor's arms. As Lunder and Julya wearily recovered themselves, he carried Sam from the link chamber to the infirmary and laid her on a bed.

'God, I feel rough,' she muttered as the robot nurse moved in to make a preliminary diagnostic check.

'Don't try to talk,' the Doctor said.'Save your strength.We'll have you up and about in no time.'

'That your professional opinion?'

He grinned.'Trust me. I'm the Doctor.'

'Doctor... I'm glad you're OK.'

He nodded but said nothing. He seemed vaguely agitated, as if he wanted to leave.

'What's up?'

'Sam, we're not out of the woods yet. In fact, we're all in terrible danger.'

'So what's new?'

'Gustav Zemler's got his hands on a doomsday weapon of unthinkable power. I have to speak to the Mendans here and try to stop him.'

'Go on,' she said.'Don't worry about me. Do your stuff. Save the world.'

He nodded silently and then left the room.

Sam lay back and rubbed her forehead. She felt sick and dizzy. The Doctor probably needed her help and all she could do was lie here. But she felt so ill. Perhaps when the antibiotics cleared up the infection she would feel better and be able to muck in.

She removed her hand from her forehead and took a sharp intake of

breath. A long thin strand of skin was stuck to her fingertips.

Chapter Fifteen
The Moons and the Star

'The Doctor cannot be allowed to live,' said Zemler. He spoke with the icy calm of the truly furious.'He knows everything.'

'I don't see how,' said Moslei carefully - but not carefully enough. The statement was enough to provoke a harsh rattling snarl from his captain.

'Don't argue with me, Moslei!' Zemler sank back in his chair as if even this sudden movement exhausted him. "The Doctor knows everything I know. Perhaps more. I've underestimated him; I thought the spiders would eat him alive. But somehow he's made contact...'

Moslei stood his ground.'You can't be sure, Captain.'

'Of course I'm sure!' Zemler was hissing like a nest of angry snakes. Moslei had not seen him so agitated since they were first stranded on Janus Prime. Not even the knowledge that the raid on the dome had been nothing more than a ruse to allow for the Doctor's escape had provoked this reaction. Not even discovery of the deliberate and irreparable damage to the spidroid control system had made him so angry. Zemler had actually slain the unfortunate trooper who had reported the news of the Doctor's successful appropriation of the shuttle and subsequent flight to the ruins. With some satisfaction Moslei identified the dead man as Nwakanma.

Minutes later they received confirmation that the Doctor and his allies had reached the Link and fled to Menda. The one piece of good news was that Varko and his remaining men, still in the ruins, had been able to retrieve the stolen shuttle. But even this did not seem to mollify Zemler.

'Insolent imbecile,' Zemler gurgled. Gasping for breath, Zemler snapped open the visor of his helmet. Saliva frothed in the skeletal mouth, pink with the blood of his rotting tongue. 'Does he think he can stop me?'

Zemler sank back breathing heavily, and watched Nwakanma's corpse dissolve inside its spacesuit. He could barely discern the details through eyes half blind with the effects of the radiation sickness. It would not be long now before the translucent flesh disintegrated entirely and the vitreous humour ran down his raw cheeks. Then he would see nothing. Before that, he would make sure that there was nothing left to see.

'Moslei,' he said, the renewed calmness of a dying man settling over him. 'It doesn't matter about the spidroids. They are no longer important. It doesn't matter about the destruction of the spider pen, either. I know all I need to know. It's time to take the final steps towards absolution.'

'Sir?'

'The weapon, Moslei. I'm going to use it.'

Moslei swallowed. 'Sir.'

'Get the men together. They have one final task to perform before the Final Decision is made.'

***

The first person Lunder sought out on his return to Menda was Kleiner. He found the controller of the Defence Force in the Link complex and travelled with him to Newtown where they were to attend a hurriedly arranged council meeting along with Julya and the Doctor.

'The Doctor requested this meeting,' Kleiner advised the commando.'He was very insistent.'

'Feels like he's taking over,' Lunder grunted. 'He asked me to guard the link at this end.'

'What did you say?'

'I said I'd think about it.'

'What did he say?'

'He said thinking is the last thing I should do.'

Kleiner couldn't help but laugh.'I take it you two didn't exactly hit it off on Janus Prime?'

'He's clever - he disabled Zemler's entire spidroid complement -but he's a liability. His priorities are all wrong.' Lunder rubbed a large hand across the stubble on his chin. 'I'm more impressed by Sam.'

'The injured girl,' acknowledged Kleiner. 'I saw her at the infirmary. Quite a mess.'

'It's not so bad, but she toughed it out all right.'

'What happened on Janus Prime?'

Lunder told him about the ambush in the ruins, the capture of the Doctor and Julya, and his leading of their subsequent rescue. He also told him that Sam had been with Vigo when Gustav Zemler murdered him.

'Any idea what that madman is really up to?' wondered Kleiner.

'The Doctor says he's sitting on some kind of giant bomb,' Lunder said, raising an eyebrow.'A doomsday device no less.'

***

'This entire solar system faces destruction, and I'm waiting to go into a committee meeting,' fumed the Doctor in disbelief. He was looking out of one of the high windows in the main council chamber, craning to see the sky.

'Expecting rain?' asked Julya as she came into the room.

'I'm looking for the moon,' he replied.

'You're about ten hours too early. It's not visible by day.'

The door to the council chamber opened and Jonah Gilly walked in followed by Anni Zeck, Kleiner, Lunder and sundry other members of the colonists' ruling elite. They took their positions around the oval table, where some of them began to pour glasses of water for themselves and generally fiddle around.

The Doctor sighed theatrically.

Jonah Gilly said, 'Welcome back, Doctor. We're all very relieved to see you again, and I believe you were able to bring back your young companion as well.'

The Doctor nodded impatiently.'Yes, Sam. She's been hurt quite badly, I'm afraid:

'By Zemler's men,' said Anni Zeck. It wasn't a question.

'I'm afraid so.'

'Kleiner tells us that Sam should recover from her wounds quite quickly. I understand she's being treated in our infirmary.'

'Yes, thank you very much. I'm grateful for your kind help. I know your resources must be limited. However -'

'Lunder has told us all about the recent events on Janus Prime,' interrupted another council member. He was the gentleman with the very hooked nose.'I would point out, Doctor, that the council frowns on any unauthorised activity carried out on its behalf. Every excursion to Janus Prime has to be cleared by us prior to -'

'Listen to me,' said the Doctor. 'There's no time to discuss the finer points of bureaucracy. Gustav Zemler is -'

'Lunder has told us about Zemler's current status as well.' Gilly shifted uneasily in his seat.'He said his men were in the advanced stages of radiation sickness and practically incapable of carrying out their duties effectively, let alone fighting.'

'Yes, but -'

'And that Zemler himself is to all intents and purposes so paranoid and delusional as to be incompetent to command them.'

'This is true, but -'

Gilly coughed loudly. 'It would appear to us that Zemler's time is nearly at and end, Doctor. I understand that the radiation poisoning on Janus Prime is eventually fatal in any case, and our policy of waiting and basic attrition had forced him to the point of defeat.'

The Doctor got to his feet, eyes wide with frustration.'Which is exactly why he is about to set in motion an ancient doomsday weapon which will destroy this entire solar system!'

Gilly blinked and then turned to Kleiner and Lunder.'What is he talking about?'

'Would you like me to repeat myself?' stormed the Doctor.

Lunder shrugged. 'I'm afraid I've seen nothing to support the Doctor's statement.'

The Doctor glared at him.

'But I have,' said Julya.

Every pair of eyes turned to look at her. She said, 'I was with the Doctor at every stage. I can verify what he says is true.'

'How? Were you with the Doctor when he met Zemler?'

'Well, no, but -'

'Then how can you corroborate what he says?'

The Doctor had sat down and was drumming his fingers loudly on the table top.

Julya said, 'When we were incarcerated with a female Janusian spider, the Doctor was able to communicate with her offspring using a kind of telepathy -'

'Can you believe this crap?' asked Lunder.

'Perhaps,' said the Doctor forcibly, 'I should tell you the whole story right from the beginning.'

'This had better be good,' grumbled the hook-nosed councillor.

'I know,' agreed the Doctor. 'Because if it isn't, and you don't take the necessary action soon, then all of us will cease to exist.'

Gilly smiled indulgently.'And how long would you say we have, exactly, Doctor?'

He quickly consulted his pocket watch.'I'd say we'd be lucky to make it past teatime. Perhaps we should all enjoy a cup now while we can.'

***

In the Link infirmary, Sam lay sweating in her bed. The infection in her shoulder was starting to make her delirious, although the drugs administered by the robot nurse made her too drowsy to care.

She couldn't stop thinking of Varko's description of the early stages of the radiation sickness. Yes, she felt sick. Yes, her skin was sticky to the touch. Yes, she was going to die. The thought of melting suddenly away like Vigo, or slowly becoming an animated cadaver like Zemler, was too much to bear. The knowledge that her cells were gradually coming apart like warm toffee induced a surge of fear which in turn caused a spike in the computer monitor's medical scan behind her.

The robot nurse trundled over and had a brief digitised discussion with the computer. Sam consciously tried to control her breathing, reducing her heart rate the best she could. She didn't want any more sedatives. She didn't want any more antibiotics or even painkillers.

She had to get up and do something.

***

'Millions of years ago,'said the Doctor,'two civilisations developed in this solar system. One on Janus Prime, and one here on Menda. The planets weren't called those names then, of course. I don't know what names the original inhabitants gave them. But they were both very advanced races, where artistic and scientific achievement had been pushed to a certain limit. Unfortunately, that limit was open warfare. It often is, in my experience.' The Doctor smiled sadly. 'Anyway, after long and bloody conflict, the people who lived on what we now call Janus Prime - and they were people, even though they were an arachnid species -overcame their differences with the inhabitants of this planet. Both races wished to ensure that they would never go to war with each other again, and so they developed a weapon of ultimate deterrent. Using their advanced technological skills, they turned their entire solar system into a gigantic bomb.'

'How?' Kleiner asked.

The Doctor was warming to his subject.'It was a terrific feat of planetary engineering. Firstly, they designed two special moons which each had the equivalent of one solar mass. The moons exist in normal space, whereas the masses coexist in hyperspace. By aligning the artificial

moons with their sun and linking them via hyperspace, the sun's critical mass would be increased to the point where the nuclear reactions at its centre become unstable and it explodes in a supernova.' The Doctor let his words hang in the air for several seconds, long enough to ensure that his audience had fully absorbed the information. He met every gaze levelly. 'Using instruments aboard my TARDIS, I have verified the hyperspatial mass of Janus Prime's moon. That is a matter of fact. I suspect Menda's moon is designed on exactly the same principle.'

Jonah Gilly took the opportunity to ask a question he thought was probably on everyone else's mind: 'But where does the Link fit into all this, Doctor?

'I'm coming to that, because the story doesn't end there. Another war did break out between the two planets. But the doomsday weapon, self-evidently, was never used. The spider people of Janus Prime slaughtered the original Mendans before the conjunction could be completed, but the Mendans had already seeded Janus Prime with isotope decay bombs, effectively destroying the Janusian civilisation. The spider people's planet became a radioactive wasteland, its inhabitants reduced to primeval arachnid savages over the millennia. Millions of years have passed with the conjunction half completed by Janus Prime's moon being in fixed orbit. In the intervening millennia, the sun has become a red giant and the weapon is thus dimensionally unbalanced. One of the side effects of the hyperspatial distortion caused by this is the Link - a simple fold in the fabric of the space-time continuum between Janus Prime and Menda. The result of that is an antiquated doomsday weapon which is now dangerously unstable. You could say it was half-cocked and on a hair trigger. And you have been using the hyperspatial Link as ants might use the barrel of a cannon.'

There was general muttering around the table. One voice rose above the others, this time Kleiner's. 'How come this radiation didn't destroy the spiders like it destroys human beings?'

'Maybe the Janusians had better natural defences - they wear their skeletons on the outside, remember, like all arachnids. And the isotope decay was designed to destroy their civilisation, I suspect, rather than their race. The ultimate humiliation. The effect is rather more drastic on humans - dissemination of the lipids leading to exponential cellular collapse. First the body starts to go, then the brain. That's probably why Gustav Zemler is now utterly insane.'

'And the control columns?'

'I'd imagine that control of each moon was based on the opposite planet,' theorised the Doctor. "The original Mendans succeeded in getting Janus Prime's moon into conjunction before they were wiped out.'

'And how is it that Zemler now has control of this doomsday weapon?' inquired Anni Zeck.

'Somehow he was able to communicate with the spiderlings in the pen. Perhaps his brain, affected by the radiation, was able to tune in to their alpha waves.'

'You mean his mental deterioration helped?' smiled Hooknose. "That he could only pick up these mysterious alpha waves if he was mad?'

'Yes, something like that.'

'Which explains, of course, why you were able to communicate with them as well.'

A tiny buzz of laughter passed around the table. The Doctor took a deep breath and turned to face Jonah Gilly.'It is vital we go back to Janus Prime and stop Zemler completing the conjunction. Mad or not, he knows his time is up. He and his men are all dying - they've nothing to lose now. There's nothing to stop them destroying themselves along with you.'

'Even if what you have told us is true,' said Gilly eventually.'there is nothing we can do. Zemler may be insane and full of apocalyptic hatred, but he still has troops loyal to him. The only people we have capable of taking them on and stopping Zemler have been exposed to the radiation for too long now. An immediate return trip would be suicide. I cannot ask them to risk their lives merely on the possibility that you are right, Doctor.'

The Doctor smiled, grimly. "Then I'll go alone.'

***

At the Link site, Vikto and Unrin were still conducting their investigation of the burnished blue control column. And, of course, their argument.

'How rude of the Doctor not to see us on his return from Janus Prime,' complained Unrin.

'I imagine that whatever scientific discoveries he made there are beyond our infantile comprehension,' replied Vikto without rancour.

'That Doctor is nothing more than a fraud; said Unrin. 'Where were his qualifications? Where did he come from?'

'I quite liked him,' saidVikto.

'A charlatan. All that alpha-wave gibberish and spider talk.'

'I thought he was very convincing.'

'Yes, but then you thought the column was made out of plastic.'

'Wait a minute,' saidVikto, holding up a hand.'I thought I heard something...'

'What? There's only us here - and the girl in the infirmary.'

'Then it must have been her.'Vikto looked puzzled.'It sounded as though it came from the link chamber, though that would be impossible...'

For once Unrin agreed. "The Doctor and his friends all returned over an hour ago.'

Vikto looked at his colleague."Then who...?'

***

Outside the council chamber in Newtown the sky was overcast. Patches of green were visible between the heavy clouds, turning to jade as the Mendan afternoon wore on.

The Doctor searched for sight of the moon. It would have to be big enough to obscure Janus as she dipped slowly towards the horizon, and therefore should not easily be hidden by the clouds. But he couldn't see it yet.

With a sigh he watched the nuclear carnage broiling across the surface of the red giant, marvelling at its beauty.

Menda was beautiful too. The birds sang, the fields were green, the water clear. No wonder Julya was so fiercely protective of her new-found Eden. And yet once again perdition lay just around the corner, and it fell to him to prevent it being turned. The Doctor met the gaze of the bloated star for several more seconds before turning and jumping into a skimmer parked by the kerb. It took only seconds to hot-wire it into life, and moments more to drive it at speed towards the road that led out of Newtown towards the Link.

***

Julya came out of the council chamber and ran down the steps just in time to see a skimmer disappear around the corner. Then she recognised the Doctor's light-brown hair flapping in the slipstream. Lunder appeared behind her a moment .later.

'Now look what you've done,' she snapped at him.

'He's a loose cannon,' said Lunder. 'Where d'you think he's gone?'

'The Link of course.'Julya took a deep breath.'He's going to do it. He's going to go back on his own.'

***

Sam did not know how much time had elapsed from when the Doctor had first laid her on the hospital bed to when she finally levered herself out of it. For a while she had been dimly aware of the sound of a couple of people moving around in the adjacent rooms to the infirmary but that seemed to have stopped now. It had been quiet ever since she had woken up - except for the last minute or so when she had heard a series of quiet noises from one of the nearby rooms. And investigation was compulsory for Sam.

She staggered as her bare feet slapped against the cold tiled floor. Sweat ran down her neck and chest. The grey T-shirt she had been given to wear was stuck to her back with perspiration. She was hot but shivering.

The wires which were connected to the diagnostic machine tore free of her skin as she crossed the infirmary to the sink unit and mirror. She got quite a fright there: dark, hollow eyes stared back at her from a zombie-

white face. Her blonde hair was matted and dirty.

She turned away from the mirror and the sink. If she lingered she might be sick again. The robot nurse twittered behind her but she ignored it.

It was cool and dark in the passageway outside the hospital room. Sam could see a light, however, further along. She used the cold stone wall for support as she walked towards it, the flesh of her hands sticking to it every so often.

She actually started to scream when she felt the hand on her shoulder, but caught herself just in time. She whirled around and found the Doctor's face looming over her in the darkness, a long finger to his lips.

'Doc-'

'Shh. Something's gone wrong.' He spoke in a whisper, gently guiding her back into a patch of shadow.

'You're telling me,' Sam hissed back.'Feel my arm.'

The Doctor frowned as if he was being distracted by trivia. He gently touched the area of Sam's arm where the subcutaneous tracer had been removed, the wound later dressed by the robot nurse.

'No, not that; Sam said.'Feel the skin.'

For a second he just looked at her, realisation dawning in those soft blue eyes. Then he gently rested the palm of his hand on hers. It came away sticky. 'Oh, Sam...'

'Doctor...' Her voice was tiny in the darkness. 'I can't die. Not like this... please...'

He went to cup her face in his hands but thought better of it, his fingers stopping short of the tear-streaked cheeks.'Sam, there's still time. To find a cure. I can -'

She shook her head. "There is no cure. It's fatal. I've seen it.'

'Shh.'

'No, it's true. I met a man on Janus Prime who -'

'No, I mean shh, be quiet.' The Doctor had switched his gaze, looking past her now. He lowered his voice even further. 'I thought I heard something.'

He stepped past her and walked down the passageway towards the light that Sam had seen originally. Sam struggled with mixed feelings of relief at seeing the Doctor and fury that he should treat her condition so casually. Then she realised that she was already following him down the corridor out of force of habit.

The Doctor disappeared into the lighted doorway. Beyond it was the chamber containing the control column and its attendant computer monitors. All were deactivated. When Sam caught up with him, the Doctor was kneeling over the bodies of two Mendan scientists.

'It's Unrin and Vikto,' the Doctor said without looking up. 'They're dead.'

'That's all I need; said Sam. 'Next comes the bit where we're arrested for murder, right?'

'Wrong,' said a voice from behind them. Sam recognised the electronic amplification of a spacesuit helmet speaker. She turned around to see a bulky spacesuited figure standing behind them aiming a laser pistol. On the collar of his suit was the name MOSLEI.

'Sergeant Moslei,' said the Doctor without missing a beat. 'Welcome to Menda.'

'What are you doing here?' asked Sam - slightly more pertinently, she thought.

'I'm here to take control,' Moslei's voice rasped through the speaker.

'By yourself?' asked the Doctor.

'No, I'm here with my men.We've secured this site and the Link control.' Several more troopers were filing into the room behind Moslei, all of them armed, each wearing a sealed spacesuit to prevent immediate dissolution.

The Doctor's face hardened.'Securing the site meant murdering these two men, I take it?'

'Casualties of war, Doctor.' Moslei aimed his pistol at the Time Lord. 'And you're next.'

'Wait, wait, wait.'The Doctor stood up, his hands raised.'If you're here to take control of the Janus conjunction, you've overlooked something: these columns only respond to alpha waves of a particular frequency.You'd need -'

'A Janusian spiderling,' Moslei finished as a trooper walked into the chamber carrying a perspex case. Inside was the pallid white shape of an infant spider.

'I think you'll find that Captain Zemler has thought of everything,' said Moslei.

Chapter Sixteen
No Turning Back

Lunder and Julya had followed the Doctor to the link site in Kleiner's personal skimmer. They had sat in baleful silence for the whole journey, while Kleiner made small talk about the council members. Only on one occasion did Julya speak, and that was to no one in general. Just after Kleiner had passed comment on the bureaucratic nonsense the council had defaulted to after the Doctor's abrupt departure, Julya said: 'At least he's out of it.'

To which Lunder had replied,'And we aren't?'

Kleiner had pulled the skimmer up outside the Link entrance, right next to the one appropriated by the Doctor, its motor still warm in the early evening air. Lunder stomped straight through the entrance and down the stone staircase that led into the site proper without pause. Julya ran to keep up with him, afraid that the commando would do some serious damage to the Time Lord when he caught up with him.

She needn't have worried: someone else saw to it that Lunder would damage no one by damaging him first. Julya found him on his knees, retching, with two spacesuited men standing over him. One raised his rifle to deliver a blow to the back of Lunder's head, while the other pointed his own weapon at Julya and Kleiner.

'All right, all right,' said Kleiner.'No one here wants to be a hero.'

'Glad to hear it,' said one of the troopers.

Julya helped Lunder to his feet. He had been badly winded but was otherwise unhurt. 'Took me by surprise; he panted. 'Didn't expect to see Zemler's men here...'

'The Doctor did ask you to guard the Link; pointed out Kleiner.

Lunder shot him a look.

'In here, all of you,' said one of the troopers as they were herded down into the subterranean caverns were the Link chamber itself and the infirmary were housed. There were more of Zemler's troops milling around, all in sealed spacesuits, all armed. All in control.

As they passed the control chamber, they caught a glimpse of a number of soldiers around the metallic-blue column. As Lunder craned to see more, the trooper nearest him jabbed the barrel of his gun into his kidneys.

'Keep looking straight ahead; he barked.'Hands on head!'

Lunder scowled at him. The man's collar tag said ANSON. He recalled him as a big kid with red hair and a bad attitude. There was no telling what he looked like now under the helmet but the attitude hadn't changed.

They were taken to the infirmary and marched inside. Seconds later the door opened again and the Doctor and Sam were thrust inside.

'You can wait in here with the others,' said the trooper who had delivered them.

'Wait for what?' asked the Doctor. 'Armageddon?'

'Just wait.' The door hissed shut.

'What's going on?' asked Julya.

'It's an invasion,' said Lunder.

'It's not an invasion,' said the Doctor. 'It's worse. Zemler's going to set the Janus conjunction in motion. He's sent his men to Menda to make sure you don't interfere with his plans.'

'How?'

'By moving Janus Prime's moon out of orbit.'

'Can we do that?'

'Not stuck in here.We have to find away out.'

Sam said,'What about a ventilator shaft?'

'Traditional but rarely effective,' smiled the Doctor. 'Not even you're that slim.' He pointed at a triangular grille set in the wall at head height. It

was about seven centimetres across at its widest point.

'I think I'll be losing a lot of weight pretty soon,' Sam said quietly. She sat on the end of the bed she had been lying on earlier. The sheets were rumpled and covered in a strange stain -skin, she realised sickly. The Doctor rested a hand on her good shoulder.

'If we could get to the armoury -' suggested Lunder.

'They'll have secured it already,' Kleiner said.

'What about the comms unit?' wondered Julya, gesturing to the device by the bed. 'We could patch a call through to Newtown. Alert Gilly.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Raising the alarm isn't a problem. But what could they do? I can't see a battalion of tractors helping much at this point.'

'I'm afraid we have isolated this facility's entire communications network,' said Moslei as he came into the room followed by Blakt and another trooper. He turned to the Doctor. 'What have you done to the control column?' he asked, lightly.

'Done? I haven't done anything.' Something gleamed in the Doctor's eye.'Having trouble getting it started?'

'The column is not responding.'

'What a pity. Have you tried the crank handle?'

'I would caution you that tongue, Doctor. We're running to a very tight schedule here, and I don't have time for jokes. The column is controlled by alpha waves. The creature we have brought for that purpose is not having any effect.'

The Doctor stepped closer.'It's probably too busy crying for its mother.'

'I'm a soldier, Doctor. Sentiment isn't my strong suit.' Moslei drew his laser pistol.'Tell me what I need to know or I will shoot one of your comrades.'

'I don't know what's wrong with it,' said the Doctor.

'Bad answer.' Moslei pointed his gun and fired. The beam punched

straight through Kleiner's heart and he dropped without even crying out.

Lunder lunged forward, but Blakt levelled his own weapon just before the commando's hands were able to reach Moslei. The Doctor gripped Lunder and pushed him back. 'Not like this,' he hissed.

Julya was kneeling by Kleiner's body where it had fallen in an uncomfortable heap. There were tears on her face when she looked up and said,'He's dead.'

'And you follow him if I don't get my answer now.' Moslei switched the aim of his pistol to Julya's head.

All eyes turned to the Doctor.

'Let me look at the control,' he said. All trace of good humour had left his face now. His eyes were no more than chips of blue ice.

Moslei stood aside as the Doctor stepped past and followed Blakt out of the infirmary. Lunder stared at the trooper who remained. By coincidence it was Anson.

'Finally built up the courage to tackle us head on?' Lunder asked.

'Courage has nothing to do with it,' said Sam. She had been growing paler by the minute. Now she seemed unable to take her eyes off Kleiner's body.

Julya carefully pulled a spare blanket over the corpse.'When's it all going to end?'

Lunder looked at her and said,'Pretty soon, I think.'

***

The Doctor ignored Moslei for a full five minutes after returning to the control room. Instead he pretended to study the burnished blue column at its centre, touching it, prodding it, even examining it with his magnifying glass. Then he turned his attention to the spiderling in the perspex box brought through the Link by Zemler's men. The creature lay right at the back of its transparent cage, unmoving. The Doctor stared into the eight little red eyes and then tapped on the perspex very gently. It didn't react.

He picked up the case and took it over to the control column. Immediately the spiderling came to life. The Doctor felt a slight pressure inside his own head as the creature's alpha-wave emissions made themselves known to the areas of his brain which were sensitive to them. But it wasn't trying to communicate. This was purely automatic feedback from the column. Interesting. All the while, the Doctor's face remained impassive. None of the humans around him would be on the same alpha-wave frequency, and there was no reason to alert them to this... whatever it was. Instead he put the spiderling down and stepped back, saying, confidently, 'I thought as much.'

'What?' demanded Moslei.

'It's broken.'

Moslei's big glove grasped a handful of the Doctor's cravat and slammed him hard against the column. The Doctor stared impassively back at his reflection in the helmet visor. 'What's the matter, Moslei? Scared?'

'Not of you,'replied Moslei.

'Zemler, then.'

'Can you repair the control column?'

'You'd better let me go. You're losing the respect of your men.' The Doctor felt the grip loosen and he slid down the column until his feet met the floor. He loosened the collar of his shirt without taking his eyes off Moslei.'It's jammed. Maybe all these centuries of disuse have made it seize up. Perhaps the material it's made from has corroded. I don't know. But it won't move Janus Prime's moon anywhere. That part of the conjunction is complete, at least.'

'It's funny,' said Moslei,'but I actually believe you. I think I always believed you.'

"Then believe me now when I say this is madness, Moslei.'

'Perhaps,' agreed the soldier.'But that's all that's left now.'

***

Sam needed to lie down again, but she was stubborn enough to insist that they prop her up on the bed with pillows.

They looked at her with mixed expressions, both trying to hide their true feelings. Julya was full of sympathy, but there was horror in her eyes: she knew what was going to happen. Lunder was trying to be brave about it, which should have been easy since it wasn't him dying, but somehow he was making it look difficult. Perhaps he was more scared by it than even he liked to admit.

'There must be something we can do,'Julya was saying.

Lunder agreed. "There must be some chance.You can't have had that bad a dose, otherwise you'd have died the moment you left Janus Prime. We've seen it happen before.'

'Yeah,' said Sam, thinking of Vigo. 'Me too.'

The door opened and the Doctor was pushed inside.

'Doctor!' said Julya immediately. 'Sam's -'

'I know,' he snapped. 'I know, I know.'

'Just one more problem to juggle, eh, Doctor?' said Sam.'Sorry.'

The Doctor and sat on the bed beside her.'You've never been a problem, Sam.'

Sam couldn't think of anything to say, but the silence was too oppressive to bear.

'Tell me how this Link thing works, then,' she said.

'The Link? Well, it's pretty simple really. Imagine a warp-elipsed spatial compression in a parallel time field, and you'd be pretty close. The Beloromans developed something similar as a form of transport in the Grekolian Era, only much more advanced of course. This one is just the result of a massive differential in the local hyperspace envelope.'

'I'm glad you spared me the technobabble.'

'You're welcome. Did you really understand it?'

'Course. I've seenStargate .'

The Doctor smiled at her, warmly and brightly. Sam never failed to wonder at how good he could make her feel, even when she was so down. They were a good team. They knew each other so well. And she could rely on him, absolutely rely on him... Her eyes prickled suddenly and she sniffed.

'So what's the score, Doctor?' asked Lunder bluntly in a perfectly timed change of subject.

The Doctor stroked Sam's arm gently as he spoke.'Zemler two, us nil. And there's no chance of extra time. Moslei's had a wasted journey. The control column at this end is inoperable. All Zemler has to do is move Menda's moon into position and the conjunction will be completed.'

'And when will he do that?' asked Julya.

'He's probably doing it as we speak.'

'Isn't there any answer?'

'There's always an answer,' said Sam. 'It's just a matter of asking the right question.'

The Doctor smiled at her and patted her hand. He completely ignored the fact that it was sticky.

'Is there no chance of sabotaging the thing from this end?' she wondered.

'No.' He shook his head. Then, suddenly:'Wait... there might not be a way to prevent it, but...' He paused.

'But what?'

The Doctor spoke urgently. 'The control system at this end is defunct, insofar as moving Janus Prime's moon out of its fixed orbit is concerned. But thereis some leeway. If the worse came to the worst, we could always try to tip the antigravitational balance.'

'Antigravitational balance?' echoed Sam. 'Once again, ladies and

gentlemen, we welcome you to Technobabble City.'

But the Doctor was too excited to listen. 'Yes, yes, yes... the moons aren't in natural orbits, don't you see? The hyperspatial masses preclude that. So they must be held by some artificial force, probably linked to the control columns. That's what Moslei's pet spiderling was picking up.'

'Whichmeans , in human terms...?'

'Which means that the moons can change their orbit distances - as they must have done when Janus became a red giant in order to fully eclipse it. They compensated for the star's increased size by simply moving closer to their planets! I should've realised sooner...'

'Which means...?' pressed Sam, impatiently.

The Doctor looked at her. 'Which means, if worse conies to worst... the control column could be used to crash Janus Prime's moon into the planet.'

There was a moment's silence.

'If worse comes to worst,' echoed Sam.

'And that would stop the conjunction?' asked Julya.

'I don't know.'

'Couldn't you just send it further out into space?' suggested Sam.

'Too risky,' said Lunder.'Zemler could bring it back, start it all off again.'

'Well, he could send it away again if you brought it closer,' retorted Sam.

'He might not have enough time,' Lunder pointed out.

'We have to try it,' said Julya.

'No, no, wait,' said the Doctor, quickly. 'I said only if the worse comes to the worst, Julya. There has to be a better way.'

'I can't see one.'

'Neither can I, yet.'

'We're running out of time, Doctor,' warned Lunder.

The Doctor nodded.'I've got to get to Janus Prime.'

'If you go back you risk radiation poisoning,' said Julya.

'I could go,' said Sam, dully.'I've already got it.'

'No. Absolutely not,' the Doctor told her firmly. 'Here you might have a chance. Another visit to Janus Prime would finish you.'

'But you're not immune, Doctor.'

'No, but I'm the only one here who stands a chance of preventing the conjunction. And to do that I've got to go to Janus Prime.'

The Doctor turned towards the door, but was stopped by a hand on his arm. It was Lander's hand.

'Doctor...'

The Time Lord looked at him, and his voice was quiet. 'I warn you, Lunder, don't try to stop me.'

Lunder stared back at him.'You'll need some kind of distraction if you want to reach the Link unseen.'

***

Moslei walked past the box containing the spiderling, considered kicking it, decided against. It seemed a foolishly spiteful thing to do, and he had already lost his cool with the Doctor. He had felt the subtle shift in his troops' attitude the moment he had grabbed the Time Lord; it only made matters worse when the Doctor had pointed it out.

Moslei stared at the control column as if willing it to function. He was angry because there was nothing whatsoever he could do. A part of him realised that he had wanted the Doctor to tell him what to do - and was resentful when he had told him to do the one thing he couldn't: stop this madness.

Fortunately he was distracted by a commotion outside the control chamber. Two troopers came in dragging two of the Mendan prisoners. Moslei was surprised to see it was the girl, Sam, and Julya, the Mendan commando who had accompanied the Doctor on Janus Prime.

'What's going on?'

One of the troopers holding Sam was Blakt.'It's this one, Sarge. She's got the radiation sickness.'

As if on cue Sam retched, bringing up a stream of vomit.

'She's very ill,' said Julya.'She needs medical treatment.'

'Ugh,' said Sam thickly. 'Sorry.'

Moslei gestured for the soldier holding Julya to release his grip. 'You were being held in an infirmary,' he stated. "There should be facilities in there to help.'

'Help?' said Julya. 'She's dying!'

'I know.'

Julya looked at him, or rather the blank red visor. Suddenly she remembered why he was wearing it. When he spoke next, his voice did not sound as harsh as she expected.

'There is nothing you can do. The condition is fatal. Painkillers may help. I'm sorry.'

He was stung by the look of disgust in Julya's eyes. 'Take them back to the infirmary,' he told the guards. And then, just before they left, he added, 'If it's any consolation, it'll all be over very soon.'

***

Unseen by Moslei or his guards, the Doctor had slipped past the cylinder chamber door on his way to the link. As he passed, the Time Lord stared hard at the recumbent spiderling, briefly renewing their mental contact. 'Be prepared,' he whispered, implanting his idea for the contingency plan. 'If I don't come back,you'll all be over the moon...'

He turned, went over to the Link, and vanished.

***

Minutes later, the Doctor walked out on to Janus Prime at a brisk pace. As expected, the Craab-class transport shuttle was sitting nearby, thrusters cooling and engines inert. There were no guards, which the Doctor considered both a good and a bad sign. Good because it meant that he wouldn't have any difficulty getting transport to Zemler's base. Bad, because it meant that most, if not all, his troops had been sent to Menda - which only served to confirm that this was indeed the beginning of the end.

The Doctor ran up the shuttle's loading ramp towards the cockpit but paused by a cargo hatch marked FLYER. The hatch was security-coded but the sonic screwdriver had it open in seconds. Inside was a small one-man vehicle, a type often stored on vessels like these for short, fast trips. Perfect.

The flyer itself reminded him of a large motorcycle with an antigravity sled instead of wheels. He slung a leg over the thick saddle and hit the ignition. The flyer immediately whined into life. A series of hatch indicators flashed from green to red and the shuttle's bay doors dropped open below him. The flyer dropped like a stone before it bounced on an invisible cushion and veered to the side. The Doctor brought it quickly under control and twisted the throttle, located per tradition on the handlebar grip. The machine lurched forward like a kicked horse and shot off across the glowing Janusian desert. He had to pull it around in a wide arc to get his bearings, skimming up and over the shuttle and then heading towards the ruins. The collapsed network of once-great buildings flashed beneath him in an angular blur. He glanced down to see if he could spot the TARDIS nestling in its alleyway but the flyer was travelling too fast. Within seconds he had cleared the city and was moving over the rolling dunes and craggy boulders that surrounded it.

The Doctor took the flyer up to its altitude ceiling, which turned out to be approximately one hundred feet. From this height, and screwing his eyes up against the air stream, he could just see the distant speck of Zemler's base dome. Leaning forward to reduce his wind resistance, he gunned the engine and pushed the machine faster.

He covered the thirty-kilometre journey in less than four minutes, bringing the flyer down and around so that it skidded to a halt by the

dome's front entrance. The huge plume of sand thrown up by the straining antigravity field covered half the dome in a luminous veil.

The Doctor was off the flyer and sprinting for the entry tunnel before the whine of its motor had died. He passed the communications unit, which had been wrecked by Lunder's plasma weapon after he had disconnected the spidroid control network. He ran past the cybernetics lab where the manacles and chains that had once held captive Janusians hung empty over dried stains on the floor. Then he smelled the rotting corpse of the giant mother spider, still wedged in the airlock. A sad litany of death, destruction and corruption. And the worst was yet to come.

The double door to Gustav Zemler's central chamber was open. The Doctor could detect a low humming noise which emanated from the dark opening. He paused on the threshold, his hair ruffled slightly by a foul-smelling breeze.

'Come in, Doctor. I've been expecting you.'

'Your type always say things like that,' commented the Doctor as he walked into the chamber. 'I think it's because you're basically insecure, and you feel the need to intimidate and control those around you.' He smiled, winningly.'In other words, a typical bully.'

A throaty laugh from the gloom. 'You didn't rush back from Menda to give me a psychological evaluation, Doctor. I've had enough of those to last me a lifetime.'

The Doctor stared at the humming control column in its glowing pit at the centre of the room. The sand around its base was littered with the pale bodies of dozens of dead spiderlings.

'I bet you failed them all,' he said quietly, and jumped down into the pit.'But you're right: I actually rushed back to try to put a stop to this abomination.'

'It's too late, Doctor,' said Zemler.'You can't stop it now.'

The Doctor ran his hands over the warm surface of the column, but it had no effect. It continued to hum loudly.

'Menda's moon is already shifting position, realigning itself with the star

at the centre of this solar system,' continued Zemler.'Very soon, Janus Prime and Menda, together with their manufactured satellites, will lie in perfect conjunction with their sun. Then everything will come to an end.'

'What, just because poor little Gustav didn't get his way? Because he bullied and whined his way to a dead-end planet and caught a nasty bout of radiation sickness?' The Doctor slapped one hand angrily against the control column and glared at the spacesuited figure sitting above him. 'You're the worst kind of fool, Zemler. I'm sorry you lost your ticket back to Earth, but you and your men could have settled on Menda easily enough, helped the colonists, started a new world. Made something out of your lives,created something - but because you couldn't have what you wanted, you've decided to make sure no one does!'

Zemler laughed again. 'But Ihave made something out of my life, Doctor. I now wield the power of total destruction over an entire solar system. Only a god has that kind of power.'

'Only a god?' The Doctor vaulted nimbly from the pit.'Only in your tiny little mind, Zemler. I've been to places and met people where something like this solar bomb is nothing more than fireworks.'

'So what's your point, Doctor?'

'My point is that this hideous little device was left here accidentally by a long-dead civilisation which should have known better. Since then, things have changed in this solar system. The sun has become a red giant. The balance of power has shifted. If you allow this thing to detonate it will not turn the sun into a supernova - it will just increase the critical mass of the tiny, super-dense neutron star at its centre until it collapses and forms a black hole instead. Not only will Janus Prime and Menda be sucked in and crushed, but so will the rest of this part of the galaxy.' The Doctor paused for breath, panting slightly. 'I cannot allow that to happen.'

'You're serious, aren't you?'

'Of course I am.'

Zemler shifted slightly in his chair as if considering the implications. 'Black hole, you say?' The Doctor nodded. 'So the destruction of this old star will result in devastation that will affect this part of the universe for the rest of time?'

'Yes.' The Doctor had an unpleasant feeling he knew where this was going.

Zemler tutted. 'You're just like all the others, Doctor: no moral fibre. Scared to look death in the face.'

'What? No!' The Doctor stepped closer, his voice low.'Zemler -please, stop it while you can!'

'I can't, Doctor. I've already told you - it's too late.' Zemler gestured towards the humming column. 'I made sure the spiderlings were used properly. The control system is jammed. Nothing, and no one, can stop it now.'

Chapter Seventeen
The Horst

Moslei burst through the doors to the infirmary. Sam was lying on the bed while Lunder and Julya stood on either side. They all turned to look at him as he surveyed the room, his breathing rasping through the loudspeaker of his helmet. A static charge filled the air as he realised what - or who - was missing.'Where's the Doctor?'

Lunder and Julya exchanged glances.

The truth came to Moslei in that moment, and a surge of excitement - possibly even relief - passed through him where he had anticipated only anger. 'He's gone, hasn't he?' he heard himself saying.'To Janus Prime.'

The prisoners continued to say nothing.

'Whileyou were brought to me as a distraction.' Moslei pointed at Sam, who smiled and waved her fingers at him.

Lunder said, 'Someone's got to do something to stop all this, Moslei.'

'That's enough from you, traitor,' barked Moslei. It wasn't that long since he was still this man's sergeant, and he fully remembered the anger he'd felt upon learning that Lunder had gone over to the Mendans.

But Lunder was already squaring up. 'I'm not the traitor here.'

'Back off, Lunder,' Moslei told him.'I haven't come to mix it with the likes of you.'

'If you two are going to have a fight, then fight,' said Sam from her pillow. 'Any more of your stupid macho talk and I'll puke again.'

For a moment longer the two men just stared at each other, until Moslei crossed to the comms unit in the corner and activated the monitor. 'I wanted to show you something.' The screen brightened and filled with an image of the Mendan sky with Janus burning overhead. 'I've had the security scanners realigned to show you a real-time picture of the sun. Watch.'

Something was taking a bite out of Janus. It was a smooth, crescent-

shaped wound on the lower edge. Impossibly, the moon was almost visibly moving to hide the sun from view.

'The conjunction is going ahead as planned,' Moslei informed them.'When the eclipse is total, the weapon will detonate and the sun will turn into a supernova. So, your little subterfuge was poindess. The Doctor has failed.'

Sam couldn't be sure, but she thought she detected a note of regret in the old soldier's voice. Gradually the image on the scanner began to darken as more and more of the sun's light was blocked off. The infirmary suddenly became as quiet as a mortuary.

***

At the entrance to the Link site itself, two of Zemler's men were standing guard. They were looking up at the red giant as well, although, with the exception of the thin shell of reflective glass that formed their helmet visors, there was nothing between them and the churning mass. They could see the dim circle of this planet's large moon nibbling at the edge of the sun. For a while it was fascinating. Millimetre by millimetre the surface of the sun was being cut away. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the surrounding sky began to darken.

One trooper turned to the other and said, 'You know, I didn't actually think he was going to do it.'

'Why not?' asked the other. 'He's mad.'

The first trooper thought about this. 'Then why did we go along with him?'

'Why not? We're all dying. This way we go out with a bang.' His friend chanced a smile. 'Biggest bang in history, you mean?'

'That's the one.'

They watched the eclipse for a little while longer.

***

'You've got to stop this,' said Julya. She tore her eyes away from the image on the monitor screen and looked imploringly at Moslei.

'Aren't any of you listening?' the soldier replied. 'I keep telling you - there's no way to stop it.'

Moslei started to withdraw, and Lunder reached out to pull him back. But the old soldier moved with unexpected speed, ramming a gloved fist into Lunder's solar plexus. Lunder sank back, momentarily paralysed.

'There's no turning back,' Moslei snarled.'Not now. Don't any of you understand that?'

He glared at Julya and Sam and then turned to leave. The door hissed shut behind him.

Julya helped Lunder up as he got his breath back. 'Everyone wants to have a crack at me today,' the man wheezed. He rubbed his chest ruefully.

Julya stared thoughtfully at the door.'He's angry. Confused.'

'He's not the only one,' said Lunder.'How are we going to make him listen?'

'There's nothing we can say that's worth listening to,' said Julya. 'There's no point in talking.'

'Then what?'

'We've got to think.'

'The Doctor will think of something,' said Sam feebly.

'You heard Moslei,'Julya replied resignedly. "The Doctor's failed. He's had his chance.'

Sam levered herself up painfully on one elbow. There was more blonde hair left behind on her pillow. She hoped she died before she went completely bald. "The Doctor always leaves it to the last minute,' she said.

'Thisis the last minute,' said Julya.

There was something in the way she said it that made Lunder look at

her. He was suddenly reminded of the cool, switched-on woman he had sat with in the ruins of Janus Prime while Zemler's spidroids searched for them. Her eyes were the same clear grey, her voice quiet but firm:

'The worse has come to the worst.'

***

The Doctor continued to glare at Zemler, his face centimetres from the man's faceplate. When Zemler released the visor the Doctor did not flinch at the sight that lay beneath it, nor from the rancid smell. His eyes stared straight into the bloodless jellies that lay in Zemler's sockets.

'Are you there, Doctor?' Zemler's jaw flapped open as he laughed again. 'I can't see you.'

The Doctor's lips tightened.'I thought there had to be a way to reverse the process... But you're too far gone, aren't you?'

'Save your breath, Doctor...' Zemler's voice wheezed and gurgled, what remained of his tongue squirming like a landed fish. 'I want nothing of you but your death.'

The Doctor turned away.'I haven't given up yet.'

He returned to the pit and jumped down, scooping up one of the dead spiderlings scattered around the sand. It was surprisingly light, virtually a husk, its legs curled up like arthritic fingers. The Doctor held it close to his face.'Alas.poorYorick...'

But like Hamlet's old friend, this one was long dead. The Doctor discarded it and picked up another. It was dead as well. He tried another. Dead. Another. Dead.

The humming of the column was oppressive this close, the resonance of its alpha-wave emissions making his head ache. But the mental pressure eased the moment his fingers brushed the body of the one spiderling that was not yet dead. Its legs twitched minutely as the Doctor picked it up. 'You've left this one alive, Zemler.'

Zemler stirred in his seat, and hope flooded through the Doctor. He raised the spiderling higher, holding it up to the control column. This pathetic creature could provide the key to stopping the conjunction. The

spiderling's legs made a crawling motion in the air and momentarily the column's incessant humming faltered.

And so, then, did the infant spider.

The Doctor felt it weaken, sensed the life seeping out of its body as he held it cupped in his hands. He hugged it to his chest, willing it to live. Just a few seconds longer!

But the tiny Janusian was at the end of its life. The spindly white legs slowly curved inward as the musculature within the creature's exoskeleton relaxed in death.

The Doctor turned.'Did your time on Titan 317 teach you how to kill innocent children as well as Cybermen?'

'All I needed to know,' replied Zemler.

***

'I don't think I like the sound of this,' said Sam.

Lunder and Julya were arguing.'We don't have any choice,'Julya said.

Lunder shook his head. 'I know what you're saying, but...'

'You heard what the Doctor said,' Julya told him. 'We all did. If the worse comes to the worst, we could crash Janus Prime's moon into the planet. End the conjunction. That's what he said.'

Sam was sitting up, holding her head in her hands. 'He only said he thought it might,' she argued.

Lunder said,'Have you ever known the Doctor to be wrong?'

Both Sam and Julya stared at him.

'The man is risking his life for us,' Lunder continued. 'I don't understand much of anything he actually said or did, but I do understand this much: we owe it to him to let him try.'

Julya pointed at the monitor screen. Barely half of Janus was visible now.'He's failed.'

'Then at least give him a chance to get back! If you go ahead with this thing, you'll destroy him along with Zemler and Janus Prime.'

'He's right,' agreed Sam weakly.

'The Doctor will be dead anyway when that moon falls into place!' said Julya. 'Look, Lunder - you didn't come here to get away from Earth and start a new life, a better life.You came for the money, like all your comrades. This planet means everything to me and the other colonists. Everything. It's more important than you, the Doctor, or me, because it's the future. I won't let it be destroyed.'

Lunder gripped her by the shoulders.'I know more than anyone how much you've given up for Mendajulya. I've seen you fight for what you believe in, and what you want here. But that's because thisis your world now - your new and better life. But the Doctor had no axe to grind with us or Zemler. He went to Janus Prime to stop that madman destroying everything because he thought it was theright thing to do.'

'There were five babies born this year on Menda,' said Julya, slowly. 'Five new lives who have never known anything other than life on this planet - and never will, if we don't protect it. We've got to crash that moon into Janus Primenow. The Doctor agreed it was our last chance.'

'As a last resort,' argued Sam.

'I don't want to condemn him,'Julya snapped.'I really don't, but what choice do we have? Can't you see that?'

Lunder looked at Sam. Her skin was as pale as bone and shiny. Her eyes looked sore and tired as they burned into his. She didn't need to say anything out loud to make him understand: I'm dying. I can't do anything. But please, don't let the Doctor die as well.

Lunder turned back to Julya. 'How do you plan to do it?'

Sam groaned and sank back on to the bed. Julya licked her lips, her heart thudding in her throat. 'Moslei's nerve is cracking, I'm sure of it. He doesn't want this to happen either. We've got to see him and convince him we can stop the conjunction.'

'Right,' said Lunder.'You can try and do that.'

'And what about you?'

'I'm going to Janus Prime to bring back the Doctor.'

***

In Newtown, the council members were all looking out of the tall windows in the council chamber. The sky had darkened to the deepest purple; the moon was a giant black cloak being drawn slowly over the surface of the broiling red star that had blessed their planet with its warm light.

'I'm very much afraid; said Gilty'that we should have listened to the Doctor more carefully.'

Anni Zeck touched his arm, just lightly, but he could feel the tremble of her fingers through the fabric of his shirt. 'I'm scared, Jonah.'

'I think we all are.'

In the open areas around the council chamber building, hundreds of people had gathered in the unnatural darkness. They had emerged from the surrounding buildings as the light faded, electric lamps shining from the windows and doorways behind them. Some had even come in from the outlying farms, terrified. The murmur of anxious voices could be heard through the glass of the council chamber windows.

'Should we tell them what's happening?" wondered Gilly.

Anni could see the fear in his warm brown eyes. She realised that, for the first time since they'd come here, Jonah had no idea what to do.

'It's an eclipse,' she said, softly. 'That's all they need know.'

'One we failed to predict?' said a third councillor. 'It makes us seem fools.'

'Well, what would you have us say?' snapped Anni.

'That it's the end of the world?' said Gilly, hollowly.

Some of the colonists were holding flashlights. Others simply held

candles. It was an eerie sight in the false dusk. Anni found the ghostly, terrified crowd more disturbing than the eclipse itself.

'They're waiting,' she said.

'They know this isn't natural. They can feel it,' said Gilly. The other councillor opened his mouth to protest but Gilly cut across him. 'For God's sake, man, we all know it. Those people out there are waiting for leadership.' He sat down, impotently. 'But where can we lead them to?'

***

Julya stared at Lunder, unable to think of anything to say.

'There's a guard outside,' said Lunder. 'I'll have to deal with him first. If I can get his spacesuit, I should be able to reach the Link without raising any suspicions.'

'Don't,'Julya whispered. 'Don't go. I can do it, I'm sure I can.'

Lunder drew his boot knife. 'I have to.'

'But the radiation... one more trip to Janus Prime and your body won't be able to stand it.'

Lunder glanced at Sam, who lay pathetically weak on the bed. He couldn't tell if she was crying or not. The sight of her lying there like that made his throat feel unbearably tight. To Julya he said, 'You're doing what you have to. Now let me do what I have to. I left Vigo to die, and I only managed to bring you back last time because of the Doctor. Even assuming youcan work the control column, I can't let the Doctor die on Janus Prime without at least trying to save him.'

Lunder reached out and held her face in his hands for a moment, then turned away. Julya stared after him, then at the floor. She knew his mind was made up.

The infirmary door did not have a lock - Lunder had only to wave a hand over the sensor for it to slide open. Standing outside was the trooper called Anson. He stiffened as he heard the pneumatic hiss, and then stiffened further as Lunder rammed the point of his boot knife into the man's chest.

Anson gave a strangulated moan and collapsed into his killer's arms. Lunder lowered him to the floor and quickly withdrew the knife.

'Hurry up,' said Julya behind him.

'Don't worry.' Lunder unlatched the helmet and removed it. Anson's eyes were staring up at him, wide with the final agony of death. Already the surrounding features were beginning to disintegrate and fall away as the man's blood ceased its circulation and the ravaged cells gave up the struggle to stay together.

'Is this really going to work?'Julya asked.

'I have no idea.'

***

The column was humming in a way that Moslei thought was more in his head than in his ears. He had an irrational desire to remove his helmet, but knew that would mean a swift and messy death. The desire remained, however. He felt claustrophobic inside the helmet. He couldn't smell it any more of course, but he could remember the sweaty fragrance of its confines well enough from many tours of duty in hostile environments. And there were none more hostile than this one.

With a shudder Moslei discovered that his fingers were actually touching the seal of the helmet. He took them away just as the female prisoner was marched into the room by Anson.

'What's this?'

'She wants to see you,' said Anson.

'There's a way to stop the conjunction,'Julya said. "The Doctor told me how.'

'You're lying.'

'No, I'm not.' Julya took a deep breath. This was going to be harder than she thought. 'Listen: the Doctor said it might be possible to crash Janus Prime's moon, using this control column. It's not fully functional, but there's still some -'

'I don't believe you,' said Moslei simply. "The Doctor would have suggested that originally if it was true.'

'It is true! The Doctor just wanted to try things his way first.' Julya stepped closer to the control column, fascinated by its almost subliminal hum. 'He's failed.'

'He's running away,' Moslei told her. 'His TARDIS thing's still on Janus Prime, remember? That's his ticket out of this mess. He's quit, and I don't blame him.'

For a second Julya didn't know what to say. She thought of the old blue police box and the impossible place inside that the Doctor had called... home. It had never occurred to her that the Doctor might have run out on them.

'Hold it, soldier.' Moslei's voice cut across her thoughts like a laser bolt. He was looking past her - she realised it instantly - at the trooper who was just about to leave the chamber. The same trooper that had brought her in here.

Anson paused, but he didn't turn around.

Moslei had his pistol out and aimed in two seconds. 'Hold it right there, son. Don't think I'm too old and too gone in the head to notice the cut in your spacesuit. Get back in here, now.'

Anson turned slowly around. Julya winced. The tear where the knife had pierced the silver material was so small. Small, but visible nonetheless.

'If you were really Anson,' Moslei continued, 'you'd be a puddle of blood and snot on the floor by now if your suit was holed. So come on - helmet off, trooper.'

The soldier unsealed the latches and removed his helmet. 'You always were a sharp-eyed bastard,' said Lunder.

'Good try, lad,' Moslei sighed.'Where did you think you were off to?'

'Janus Prime. I was going to try to save the Doctor before we crash the moon into the planet.'

Moslei turned to Julya. "This true?' She nodded. 'Only one problem,

then,' said Moslei.'You've got to get through me first.'

***

There were no more spiderlings left alive. The Doctor even tried the spider pen, but those that had survived the flames had been used by Zemler to operate the Janus conjunction. He sprinted back to the control chamber and confronted Zemler again.

'I've just had another idea,' he said quickly, staring into the dead-fish eyes once more.'Your brain is operating on an unusual alpha-wave frequency due to its decomposition. I don't know for how much longer that will last, but it's our only hope. I can just about match those frequencies naturally. Call it a gift. Now if we concentrate, I think we could operate the control column ourselves, together.' Zemler stared back at him. 'What do you say, Zemler?' the Doctor urged him, resting his hands on the man's shoulders.'We can do it. Come on!' Silence.'Zemler?' The Doctor hesitated.'Youhave to help me!'

Zemler just laughed. 'Rot in my hell, Doctor.'

With a cry of exasperation the Doctor turned and ran back down to the control column. He knew in his hearts of hearts that even he didn't have the mental power to operate it alone.

His mind raced. Would he even have time to get back to Menda and attempt to crash-land Janus Prime's moon?

Only then did he realise that he had heard something above the mind-numbing hum of the column - a sound which his subconscious had identified and ignored as the rushing of the wind outside the dome, a storm perhaps, caused by the elemental forces which would no doubt start to lash at the surface of the planet as the conjunction neared its conclusion.

The rattling of the walkway by his head made him look up with a start. Instinctively he ducked, thinking Zemler had actually moved from his seat and was trying to attack him physically. But then he saw a pair of booted feet stop level with his face. He looked up.

'Moslei!'

In a flash the Doctor realised that the wind he had half-heard minutes

earlier must in fact have been the landing rockets of the shuttle as it brought the soldier from the Link to the dome. For a long moment he stared into the barrel of Moslei's gun. Then the sergeant leaned down and helped the Doctor out of the pit.

'What are you doing here?'the Doctor asked,incredulously.'Not planning to shoot me, then?'

'Never stop asking stupid questions, do you?' said Moslei.

Another figure joined them. 'Never mind the chitchat,' said Lunder.'Let's just do this and get out of here.'

Moslei was carrying a plasma rifle. He raised it to his shoulder and sighted along the wide barrel at Gustav Zemler.

'Moslei? Is that you?' Zemler's voice spluttered in the dark. 'Don't tell me youVe lost your nerve as well.'

'I've come back to do what I should have done a long time ago, Captain,' Moslei replied.'Put you down like the mad dog you are.'

'It won't make any difference, you fool. This solar system dies tonight, and nothing will stop it. Kill me if you like - you'll be following right behind!'

Moslei said nothing as he pulled the trigger, and the plasma beam flashed through Zemler's spacesuit. Dark liquid sprayed out of the gash. Zemler struggled, pulling himself upright for the first time in months, using every last ounce of strength to meet his end standing. He didn't stop laughing.

Moslei fired again. Another hole opened up in the suit, and more of Zemler's body spurted through it. The man staggered forward, jets of fluid erupting from every tear. Moslei watched as Zemler's mouth opened wide in a final, silent scream. The last remaining skin on his face, no more than slime now, ran off the bone as the skull itself melted and split away from the brain beneath. Then that itself dissolved into a stream of grey sludge as the liquefied corpse collapsed and spread across the floor.

Moslei watched the slime pooling around his boots until he felt Lunder's hand on his arm.'Hey, come on.'

Moslei was shaking. 'Why... why didn't I do that before all this started?'

'Because you were a loyal soldier, I suspect,' the Doctor told him. 'Completely misguided, but loyal. Now may I suggest we leave before we all end up paddling in Zemler's remains?'

'There's one more thing I have to do.' Moslei turned and slowly raised the plasma rifle again, this time aiming at the control column at the centre of the room. He fired twice, but the beam just reflected from its surface in an emerald flicker.

'You're wasting your time,' said the Doctor. "The column's immune to any kind of energy discharge.'

'Come on, we're getting out of here.' Lunder grabbed the Doctor's arm and pulled him towards the door. 'Julya's going to crash Janus Prime's moon right this minute - we have to get awaynow '

'What?' The Doctor glared angrily at him. 'Is that why you followed me here? Lunder, you fool!'

'Save your profound gratitude for later, Doctor.' Lunder hauled him physically towards the exit again. 'We've got to get back to the link.'

'Come on, let's go!' yelled Moslei behind them.'Go!'

The Doctor ran with them out of the dome, into the cold black air of Janus Prime. The one-man flyer he had used to get here from the Link was sitting beneath the shuttle itself, casting its own shadow up on to the larger vessel's undercarriage. He followed Lunder up the loading ramp, pausing on the threshold to look up at the sky.

The moon was visibly larger than it had been since they arrived. It now completely blotted out the light of Janus, including its glowing red corona. A deep blackness filled the sky, making the glowing desert sand seem brighter and more surreal than ever.

Moslei joined him at the top of the ramp, his bulky spacesuit making him slower than Lunder and the Doctor. He followed the direction of the Time Lord's concerned gaze.

'She's really done it,' the Doctor whispered.'It's coming down.'

Moslei watched the moon draw closer, appalled that he could actually see it happening.'What happens now?' he asked.

A new breeze flicked contemptuously at the Doctor's hair.

'I really don't know,' he said.

Chapter Eighteen
Moonfall

The column stood in the centre of the darkened room, humming smugly, its angular design reflecting what little available light there was in confusing and distracting patterns.Julya was revolted by the metallic blue sheen now.

The spiderling looked happy enough. It was sitting in the middle of its box, its torso gently throbbing in time to its heartbeat. Julya had taken it to the control column and it had reacted instantly. Somehow, she knew that it had sensed her purpose and made the control operate in the only way left to it.

To crash Janus Prime's moon.

Prevent the conjunction.

Destroy Gustav Zemler.

Kill the Doctor.

And kill Lunder.

Julya sank to the cold stone floor and hugged her knees. For some reason, she couldn't cry. She felt vaguely worried that it meant she didn't care, but she knew that she did. Perhaps it was just shock.

'I guess it must be,' said a voice behind her, very quietly.

Julya turned her head to see Sam standing in the doorway, wrapped in a sheet. She looked deathly pale.

'Must be what?'

'Shock,' said Sam.

Julya half smiled.'I suppose that's the spiderling doing that.'

'The telepathy bit, you mean?'

'Yes. The Doctor said they broadcast alpha waves. Maybe that

generates a kind of telepathic communications net nearby. I always seem to get a headache when they're about, anyway.' Stop rambling, she told herself. She tried another smile out on Sam, a faint one, but it drew no response. She couldn't tell if Sam's scowl was because she was angry, ill, or just looked like that anyway. Probably it was a mixture of all three.

'I can't believe you did it,' said Sam. She shuffled forwards, her bare feet leaving moist footprints on the flagstones.

'I had to,' she said simply. She was sick of saying it, and sick of thinking it. She wanted to think about Menda, about saving it from being vaporised in a supernova, about its future, and the colony. But all she could picture in her mind's eye was the Doctor, his sad blue eyes, the easy grin. His earnest politeness, the terrible sense of urgency.

And of course Lunder.

Funnily enough, she could barely picture him. And that worried her as well.

'How do you know it worked?' asked Sam.

'I just know.'

Sam squatted down next to the spiderling box. The thing looked obscenely satisfied with itself. "The other troopers are wondering what to do without Moslei. I told them what I thought they could do, but it wasn't appreciated.'

Julya could no longer tell if Sam was joking or not. 'Sam, I'm sorry. I truly am.'

'Course you are.'

'I liked the Doctor a lot.'

Sam sniffed. 'You liked him.'

'Yes. But I think I loved Lunder.'

'Well, he certainly loved you. Bit late now, though, isn't it?'

Julya got to her feet.'It's not over yet.'

'You must've learned that one from the Doctor.'

'I mean it has to take some time for the moon to crash into Janus Prime, doesn't it? If the Doctor and Lunder are still alive, they might have a chance to make it back to the Link.'

Sam glanced reflexivery in the direction of the Link chamber. 'How much time?'

'I don't know. Possibly only minutes.'

'Minutes is all he needs.' Sam headed for the door. 'I think I'll wait for him.' She sniffed again. 'What else is there to do?'

***

The shuttle flew erratically. The proximity of the planet's moon was causing gravitic shifts, freak winds and electrical disturbances in its atmosphere. The ship bucked and swooped with such ferocity that its occupants were forced to hold tightly on to their seats to avoid being tossed around the cabin. Moslei secured himself in the passenger hold while Lunder fought to keep the vessel flying straight. Somehow the Doctor succeeded in crawling to the cockpit and grabbing hold of the pilot's seat where Lunder was strapping himself in one-handed. The ship veered off to starboard at an alarming angle, causing the Doctor to lose his footing.

'Both hands on the wheel, Lunder!' he cried.

Lunder began to bleed off the shuttle's altitude, fighting against the wide-bellied ship's tendency to wallow. His hands felt slippery with sweat on the joysticks.'You're a pilot too, are you?' he said.

The Doctor grinned madly at him. 'Naturally. I trained on the Mars-Venus routes three hundred years from now.'

Lunder cocked an eyebrow. 'Oh, well that's all right, then.'

The Doctor looked down at Lunder as lightning blazed outside and briefly lit the interior of the flight deck. Lunder's face was concentrated in a granite frown, his hands clenched around the joysticks.

'Whatever possessed you to come after me?' yelled the Doctor over the aircraft's angry roar.

Lunder's teeth remained visible as he replied,'Someone had to kill Zemler.'

'But Moslei did that.' Lunder shrugged. 'We're heading for the Link I take it -' the Doctor began, but the shuttle suddenly dropped ten metres through a pocket of cold air and the jolt nearly dislodged him from his position behind the pilot's seat. He struggled into the copilot's position, fastening the lapstrap the best he could.

'We've still got time to reach it,' affirmed Lunder.'We're coming in to land now.'

'You don't understand,' began the Doctor again, but his voice couldn't compete with the whine of the protesting engines.

The shuttle dived for the ground, its tail fins raked by long fingers of dazzling electrical energy as if the moon above was teaching out to claw it back to its doom. The shuttle hit the ground awkwardly, Lunder unable to compensate properly for a savage crosswind as it completed its descent. The port-side landing struts bent and tore free, causing the vessel to list alarmingly and skid sideways across the sand. The outer hull was cracked open as the shuttle ground to a concussive halt, nose down.

The Doctor and Lunder unbuckled their restraining straps and clambered out of the seats. A cut above Lunder's right eye was oozing blood. Dizzily he took the Doctor's proffered hand and the pair of them crabbed up the inclined deck to the door that led to the main passenger cabin.

Moslei was still wedged between the two benches where he had secured himself for the duration. There were a series of jagged cracks across the visor of his helmet. With help from the Doctor and Lunder he managed to remove the helmet. It hit the deck with a solid clang and rolled away into the intermittent shadows. The internal lights had begun to flicker, the wiring that carried the necessary current fatally damaged in the crash.

They helped Moslei out of the shuttle and found that the landing ramp was jammed and would not extend. They would have to jump down to

the ground. Lunder went first, rolling easily as he hit the sand. He then helped Moslei, who stumbled under the weight of his spacesuit, his ravaged leg muscles no longer fully functional.

When the Doctor landed lightly beside them, there was a look of extreme anxiety on his face. The wind was wild now, flapping at his velvet coat and making his hair whip madly this way and that.Where was the infuriating smile and insufferable confidence? wondered Lunder.

With Moslei following, Lunder set off after the Doctor. The sky above was the deepest and most impenetrable black he had ever seen, as cold and empty as the blackness that exists only in the vast reaches of empty space between the galaxies.

He could see the moon, however. It was close enough now to reflect some of the light from Janus Prime's pale-blue glow. Lunder could see its cratered surface filling the heavens, a craggy green boot heel stamping down on their ant's-eye view of the world.

***

Julya stood by Sam at the observation window overlooking the link. It rippled innocently at the far end of the low room. 'Any second they could step through that Link.'

'Any second,' repeated Sam. She almost believed it.

'Sam, why did you say Lunder loved me?'

'You know he does.'

'Did he tell you?'

'Not in so many words. But a girl can tell, can't she?'

'Can you?'

Sam simply sniffed again.

Jutya smiled humourlessly. It didn't make it any easier, knowing for sure Lunder had felt that strongly about her. She could already feel a crushing wall of guilt looming ahead of her without that. But she had only ever had time to think about Menda, not people. Love and Lunder had

come second, right up to the end.

Before she could say anything else to Sam, they both heard the scrape of a spacesuit boot on the concrete behind them. They turned to see Varko and Blakt standing there, laser rifles hanging loosely at their sides.

'It's over, isn't it?' asked Blakt.

Julya nodded.

Varko said, "The eclipse is almost total now. It's like midnight outside. You can see the lights of Newtown from the road.' His voice was heavy with emotion, clear even through the electronic distortion of the helmet speaker.

Julya looked back at the Link. 'If we're all still here in a few minutes' time, then we'll know it worked.'

'I thought I'd got used to the idea of waiting to die,' said Blakt. 'But I can't handle this.'

'What are you hanging around here for?' asked Varko.

Julya let out a deep breath. 'If they have enough time, Lunder and Moslei will get back through the Link. Hopefully they'll have the Doctor with them.'

'It doesn't matter much to us either way now,' said Blakt. 'Our suits' air supplies are nearly used up. If the supernova doesn't get us, then the radiation will.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Like I said, we've sort of got used to the idea of dying.'

'Well, you are soldiers, aren't you?' said Sam, a little dismissively.

'Don't blame you for being pissed off,' said Varko. "This isn't your problem, is it? The rest of us have brought this on ourselves, one way or another.'

'The Doctor excels at making other people's problems our own,' said

Sam. She glanced at him and smiled a little. 'Nice thought, though. Funny how imminent death makes us look again at the things we did while we were alive.'

Blakt said, 'I feel like I regret just about everything I ever did, now.'

'I don't,' whispered Sam to herself. 'Not one bit.'

***

As the moon bore down on Janus Prime it sent Shockwaves through the planet's thin atmosphere. Tidal currents in the otherwise leaden air stirred for the first time in aeons. As the gases condensed, high-pressure fronts crashed into being with thunderous roars, and lightning tore back and forth between the surface of the planet and its prodigal satellite. Sand whipped up from the luminous deserts created an ever-changing miasma of light.

The Doctor stopped and gazed up at the pale-blue aurora which danced in the blackness above.'Beautiful,' he breathed.

'What?' shouted Lunder, unable to hear him over the incessantly roaring wind.

'I said, it's beautiful,' he repeated sadly. 'I once convinced a machine, a probe intelligence, that this was happening, to destroy it. Never thought I'd actually see it for myself.' He shook his head, sadly.'Consequences. Always consequences.'

'We haven't got time for this,' Lunder yelled.'Come on!'

'Wait.' The Doctor held him back.'Look!'

He was pointing at the edge of the ruins. Things were moving over the city walls - large black shapes with eight thick legs.

'Spiders,' said Lunder.

'Janusians,' the Doctor corrected him.

They came quickly, racing across the shifting sand towards the three men, virtually a stampede. Dust flew into the air as multiple legs dug into the dunes.

Lunder instinctively felt for his ripgun, only to find that he had lost it in the shuttle crash. He hadn't even noticed until now. Perhaps it was a side effect of spending too long with the Doctor. Either way it left him with no option but to stand and watch as the giant spiders - Janusians - poured out of the ruins of their ancient city and fled to the hills. He was uncomfortably reminded of a disturbed nest.

One or two of the creatures veered from the herd and headed for the downed shuttle, taking shelter under the wreckage. They squeezed their bodies between the undercarriage and the desert and folded their legs up tightly. The wind continued to buffet the vessel and lightning made the whole sky flicker.

More spiders scuttled past, hissing and spitting. Lunder and Moslei watched apprehensively, perhaps feeling the urge to run with them.

"They won't bother us,' said the Doctor calmly. "They're just frightened, that's all.'

"They're not the only ones,' said Moslei.

'Don't worry,' said Lunder.'We've reached the Link.' He pointed at the rippling space twenty metres away. 'On the other side of that is Menda - we'll be home and safe.'

'I can't go,' Moslei argued. 'I've lost my helmet. The moment I reach Menda I'll die.'

'It doesn't matter,'the Doctor said.'None of us can go back now.'

Lunder looked at the Doctor and Moslei. 'What do you mean? We've not been here that long... the radiation can't have -'

'It's immaterial now,' said the Doctor.'We can't use the link: the moment Julya moved Janus Prime's moon from its fixed position, the delicate hyperspatial balance shifted. The Link was just an accidental side effect of the half-completed conjunction, remember. Now it won't lead anywhere.' He pointed at the link. 'Step into that and you'll be disintegrated across the local space-
time continuum with catastrophic results.'

Lunder looked at him, open-mouthed. He could scarcely comprehend

what he was being told. The final few minutes of his life had arrived. He was going to die on Janus Prime after all. A wild panic erupted in his gut and bubbled up through his chest and throat. He clamped his jaws shut. All he could see were the Doctor's sad blue eyes looking back at him, and he knew that the Time Lord could see the fear rising in his own.

The Doctor rested a hand on Lander's shoulder.'I'm sorry.'

***

There were nearly seven hundred colonists crowding in the centre of Newtown, now, all of them carrying lamps or candles. The sky was like a black blanket over them. Even the distant stars seemed subdued in the gloom, as if the constellations that neighboured Janus were turning their backs.

'Still no word from Kleiner?' asked Anni Zeck, picking at her nails under the harsh electric lighting.

The inquiry was directed at a communications console in the corner of the room, where a young comms assistant was wired in. He looked up. 'WeVe heard nothing from Kleiner since he left with Lunder and Julya.'

'They were chasing after the Doctor,' remembered Gilly.'And he was headed for the Link.'

'We should've heard something by now,' said Anni.

'You're right. Contact the Link site itself,' ordered Gilly.

'I already have,' responded the assistant. 'There's no reply. All comms are down.'

Anni exchanged a look with Gilly.

'I could send someone to the Link site for a first-hand report,' suggested the assistant.

'There's no point,' said Anni, her voice rising as her throat tightened. "The Doctor was right. This entire solar system is one huge doomsday device, and Zemler is going to explode it!'

'Anni -' began Gilly.

'Don't you see?' Anni turned to stare at him. 'He must've finally sent his men through the Link, to secure the controls.'

Gilly felt his skin grow hot with sudden apprehension.'If you're right, Kleiner and the others must've walked right into it.'

'We should go there.'

'And do what?'

'Anything,' cried Anni. 'We can't just let Zemler take everything we've fought for away without a stand of some kind!'

Gilly sighed. 'It's too late, Anni,' he said, softly. 'Our place is here, with our people.' He looked out at the lake of flickering light spread across the town centre, then crossed the room to the door.

A few moments later, Anni Zeck could see him move into the ghostly crowd, to become one with the apparitions staring up at the sky.

***

It's an odd thing, dying, thought Sam. You spend your whole life alive, you travel the cosmos, see things and places no one else has ever seen, and then suddenly it's over. Every single moment of your life up to this point has allowed you a choice: whether to join a disgraced Time Lord and wander in the fourth dimension or stay behind and go back to school in Shoreditch; even which flavour of ice-cream to have for dessert, vanilla or chocolate - or even both.

But death was the complete absence of choice. Inexorable and inescapable. It always got you in the end.

Now Sam found herself literally staring it in the face: the mirror showed a young woman, thin-faced, dark-eyed, pale-skinned. She pushed out a blood-sore lower lip and blew at the remains of the fringe that hung limply over her eyes.

Bye, Sam Jones. It's been good.

The robot nurse injected another dose of painkiller into her less bad arm and Sam twitched. Funny how you still felt even minor pains when you

were this close to dying. What was the point of that?

Sam limped away from the mirror and rested against the bed, pulling the sheet back up over her shoulders. She had almost collapsed again by the Link room and had to be helped back to the infirmary by Julya and Varko, where she had somehow found the strength to yell at them all to leave her alone. Everyone had the right to be left to die on their own, didn't they?

There was only one person in the universe she wanted with her now, and he was on the other side of the solar system. Typically.

And Sam couldn't bear the thought of spending her last moments with the people who were responsible for killing him.

She sniffed, feeling stronger because of the analgesics, but more ashamed than ever that she felt so sorry for herself. But she had never planned to end her days like this - alone and frightened in an alien hospital room with no visitors; with no one who loved her and no one to love.

She thought of past friends and lovers. She had never really believed in God but she wished she did now.

On the monitor screen in the corner of the room, the Mendan moon finally eclipsed Janus. The last slim curve of the vermilion sun left visible disappeared, and night fell early on Menda.

A dark curtain of silence was drawn across the planet in its wake.

The monitor was nothing more than a black rectangle.

How long would it take?

In a tiny futile panic, Sam found that she couldn't decide which she would prefer: to see Menda saved and the Doctor's sacrifice not to be in vain, or for the big fat star to burst like a rotten fruit and take everything and everyone here with it.

***

The Link blurred and rippled, and for a moment Julya thought someone was coming through it. Her pulse raced as the spatial distortion

stretched and twisted, and she called out in alarm.

But no one emerged.

The air surrounding the Link itself had taken on a greenish hue, like mould, or something poisoned, and Julya instinctively felt things weren't right.

A trooper stepped up behind them, ostensibly reporting to Varko and Blakt. Although he spoke with reverential quietness, Julya could hear him easily:

'The eclipse is now total. The conjunction is complete.'

No one said anything in reply. Sam appeared, looking like a ghost in her white sheet, walking slowly from the direction of the infirmary. Her eyes looked sore and wet, and it was evident that she knew what had happened.

'It's over,' she said.

Varko turned to Julya. 'Unless your theory holds up.'

'It's not my theory,' she snapped stupidly. As if it mattered now.

'How long will it take?'

She wasn't sure if he meant for the sun to turn supernova or for the eclipse to end. 'I don't know,' she said, and returned her attention to the link.

It was growing smaller.

Flickering.

Dying.

Julya's mouth ran suddenly dry. 'They're not coming back,' she whispered.

'Shh, listen -' said Sam. But they couldn't hear anything. The whole Link site was tomb-silent.

Sam said,'The control column's stopped humming.'

Chapter Nineteen
The Last Death

The Link pulled at the fabric of space like the fingers of an invisible giant tugging on reality. A strange glow diffused the empty twist of air as the forces that created it began to interfere with the visible spectrum and light itself found its path hindered.

The Doctor was watching the Link closely, apparently mesmerised by its death throes. It was not a thing of beauty; it was a scar on the surface of the universe. His eyes reflected the green light, shining back with their own blaze of curiosity. He started to walk towards it, slowly at first, but then with increasing purpose.

Lunder watched him go. He still felt dazed from the crash, and it took him a second to respond. He jumped forward and grabbed the Doctor's arm.'Hold it. Where d'you think you're off to?'

The Doctor looked at him but said nothing. Then his eyes turned up towards the bloated moon above and considered it intently. Lunder followed his gaze. He could see the moon's pockmarked surface illuminated by the proximity of the planet he stood on. Every crater was starkly visible. His legs felt weak with primeval fear of its enormity.

'Doctor, I think we should try to get back to your TARDIS,' said Moslei as he caught them up. 'If it has any transportation capability, we should at least try to reach it.'

The Doctor actually smiled at the old sergeant.'Oh, the TARDIS has transportation capability, all right. It could take us all off this planet in the blink of an eye.'

'Let's go for it, then!' yelled Lunder.

The Doctor shook his head. 'It's in the middle of those ruins. We'd never reach it in time.'

'We have to try!'

'No no no. There's more at stake here than saving our own skins.' The Doctor pointed at the crashed shuttle, and the dark shapes still huddled beneath it. "There's the Janusians to consider as well. They have as

much right to life as we do.'

Lunder gaped. 'Those spiders?'

'They were people once, Lunder, like you and me. They might have had eight legs and mouths which opened sideways, but they lived together in a community, with friends and relatives, neighbours, work, science, art. This is their world, and their descendants still live here. We can't abandon them.'

'But they're finished anyway. The planet's doomed! There's nothing we can do.'

'Ah, well,' said the Doctor, as he turned back to the Link with that look in his eyes.'I think I've just had an idea about that...'

***

The Link was continuing to shrink. Julya leaned against the glass of the observation window and willed someone to step out of it. Anyone. The Doctor, Lunder, even Moslei. Just someone who could tell her what had happened on Janus Prime, and that what she had done was right.

Sam's forehead was resting against the glass too. A thin stream of colourless fluid was running down the glass from where her skin touched it.

'I thought you wanted to be on your own,' said Julya. The silence was getting to her now, a pause so pregnant with possibilities that her nerves were drawn tight as bowstrings.

Sam didn't reply at first. Then she said, "The way I feel now, I don't care. The Band of the Coldstream Guards could march through here and watch me die.'

Julya guessed she was delirious and said no more.

'Come and take a look at this,' said Varko, breaking the sullen hush as he stomped through the door. Such was the urgency in his voice that both Julya and Sam responded automatically, following the trooper into the infirmary.

Inside, Blakt and another trooper were crouched over the monitor

screen. Sam and Julya pushed past them to look.

There was a thin red line visible in the darkness on the screen. As they watched, it grew into a slim curve. Crimson light oozed from it like blood from a scalpel incision.

The moon had passed the point of total eclipse.

Sunlight spilled out of the crescent-shaped curve, brighter and brighter.

'We've done it,'Julya said.'The conjunction's failed.'

'You've done it,' Sam corrected her.

'It was the Doctor's idea, and it worked.' Julya felt no sense of joy or relief. Deep inside she could sense the animal instinct that made her grateful for survival, but beyond that there was nothing more than a sense of great loss, terrible and agonising. For a few seconds she felt quite faint as the tension flooded out of her chest, leaving in its place the hopeless realisation of the fresh consequences to be faced.

'Pity he's not here to enjoy it,' said Sam as she watched the sun reappear from behind Menda's moon. Then she turned and headed for the Link.

There was no one there. The Link chamber was empty. There wasn't even the telltale ripple in the air that represented the Link to Janus Prime. It had disappeared. Sam opened the door to the chamber and limped inside.

She was standing in an empty room.

Outside, julya watched through the window as Sam sank to her knees, her eyes filling with tears.

***

'If you have an idea, Doctor, then now would be a good time to tell us what it is.'

The Doctor took a deep breath, talking as loudly as he could over the noise of the wind: 'There might be a way to destroy the control exerted by Menda over this planet's moon from here. The Link connects directly

to Menda, but it's foiling and will therefore be dimensionally unstable. If we can sever that connection, the control column on Menda will effectively short-circuit and the moon will snap back to its proper orbit.'

'You're sure?'

'No.'

'But it's our only chance, right?'

'We have to hold back death for as long as possible, Lunder.'

'And you've only just thought of this now, at the very last moment?'

The Doctor nodded. 'I'm sorry. That's often the way it is with me.'

'Then let's get to it. What do we have to do?'

'If the Link is disturbed now, it will probably collapse in on itself...'

'What do you mean, "disturbed"?'

'If someone tries to use it.'

Lunder looked at the rippling distortion, and, as he did so, the Doctor walked towards it. Lunder dived after him and pulled him back again, but the Doctor brushed him off with disconcerting ease.

'Wait a second!' Lunder yelled at him. 'You said if any one used the link now they'd be killed.'

'Disintegrated, yes,' agreed the Doctor. 'But it will destroy the Link as well. Sever the control. There's no other way.'

He started forward again, but a more determined effort from Lunder brought them both down in a heap in the glowing sand. 'Not you,' grunted the commando.

'Don't be a fool, let me go!'

'Moslei should go!'yelled Lunder.'He's dead anyway!'

The Doctor struggled violently. 'No, Lunder! There's no time to argue.

The Link is failing fast. If we don't destroy it now -'

'He's right, Doctor,' said a voice calmly from above them.'I'll go.' They looked up as Moslei walked past them towards the Link.

'Moslei!' hissed the Doctor, scrambling to his feet.

But it was too late.

Moslei paused on the threshold of the link for only a moment, before stepping through it. His spacesuited figure folded out of existence in the blink of an eye and the rippling space around it suddenly convulsed and fell still.

The Doctor and Lunder were crouched in the sand, eyes screwed up against the sand-laden wind as it screamed across the desert. As the next gust subsided, Lunder crawled forward to the spot where the Link had been.

'It's gone,' he said.

The Doctor got to his feet as the wind slowly began to subside. 'He did it. He's broken the dimensional Link to Menda.'

Both men instinctively looked skyward. The moon hung huge and heavy, almost crushing them beneath its promised weight.

But it grew no larger.

Lunder laughed. He couldn't help it: it just came over him in a torrent of relief. The Doctor was grinning like a maniac, his hair blowing crazily around his head in the wild wind.

The red glow of the sun's corona could be seen burning once more around the moon's edge. Gradually, the glow brightened until a glimmer of light peeked out at Janus Prime. The mist of light thrown up from the desert sands drifted away like a coruscating shroud.

'The first dawn in over a million years,' said the Doctor.

Lunder stared up at the chink of light, his face warmed by its sudden and unfamiliar heat. He was breathing in great gulps, his throat tight with emotion. 'We really did it,' he said. 'It'll take a while for the moon to return

to its orbit, but...' He paused.

'Moslei did it,' the Doctor added, quietly. 'But yes, I suppose we did our bit.' He clapped Lunder on the shoulder. 'Still, it's best not to dwell on it. Success goes to the head, you know. Come on, we've got no time to lose.'

Lunder dragged his attention back to the Time Lord, who was already striding off towards the ruined city.'What now?' he called after him.

'Yes, now!'

Lunder jogged to catch up. 'I mean, what's the hurry? The conjunction's failed and we've stopped the moon from crashing. Menda's safe and so are we.'

'No we're not. You're forgetting the radiation. You've probably been here too long now and I certainly have.'

Lunder stopped. 'You mean - we've got the sickness?'

The Doctor carried on walking.'Exactly, which is why we can't waste any time in getting back to the TARDIS and finding a cure. Come on, keep up!'

***

The sound of raised and delighted voices filled the Link site on Menda. A number of skimmers had drawn up outside and disgorged Jonah Gilly, Anni Zeck and the rest of the council members. They hurried through the entrance, congratulating each other and generally showing all the signs of a group of people who had narrowly escaped a terrifying death.

They found Julya in the control-column room, sitting on the floor by the perspex box containing the Janusian spiderling. It was dead, wizened like a dried fruit in the corner. The column was silent and still, its once burnished blue surface now a dull matt black.

Jonah Gilly rushed forward. 'Julya, thank goodness! What the devil happened? We saw the eclipse! Was the Doctor right?'

She nodded without looking up. 'He was.'

'Where is he?'

'He's dead.'

Gilly looked startled. 'Dead? How?'

'He went to Janus Prime to try to stop the conjunction. It didn't work.'

'Then how -'

'Before he went he told me how to stop it from here, by destroying Janus Prime.'

'And did you?' asked Anni Zeck.

Again Julya just nodded. She stood up and listened to the colony leaders slapping each other and shaking hands and kissing.

'Where's Kleiner?' asked Anni Zeck.

'He was shot by Zemler's men.' The jubilant crowd quietened around them. "They tried to take control of this by force.' She kicked the blackened control column half-heartedly.'Don't worry,' she went on. "They're not here to stay. They're dying from the radiation sickness, and they gave themselves up when Moslei went back to Janus Prime with the Doctor. And Lunder.'

'Lunder?' Anni was pale.

'The link closed up when Janus Prime was destroyed. They're not coming back.' Julya turned to leave 'The Doctor's friend is in the Link chamber. She's dying. Tell her I'm sorry.'

'Where are you going?'

'Home.'

***

They found Sam lying on the floor of the Link room in a puddle. She was shivering and delirious, unable to respond to her name or any stimulus. By the time the paramedics moved her to the infirmary she had slipped into a coma.

Ten minutes later the robot nurse would confirm the young woman's time of death as 019.04 Mendan Time.

***

Lunder sat in the high-backed chair by the TARDIS library, feeling dazed and not a little sick. He put this down to the physical exertions of the last couple of days, or even the massive relief of tension which had followed. He even blamed the disorientating effect of stepping into the Doctor's police box to find this impossibly huge and ancient place inside.

What he refused to acknowledge was the fact that he might be feeling like this due to the effect of the radiation sickness. Nevertheless, it had not prevented him from asking the Doctor how he planned to come up with a cure.

By way of reply, the Doctor had dug in his jacket pocket and pulled out the body of a dead spiderling. It was curled up like a corpse's fist and surprisingly light.'I picked up this little fellow in Zemler's base. For some reason these creatures are immune to Janus Prime's radioactive properties,' he said.'With the help of the equipment I have in the TARDIS laboratory, I hope to isolate that reason and manufacture a suitable serum. The key is the lipid deterioration. Find out what triggers that, reverse it, and we should be halfway there.'

'Just like that?'

'Well, it could take a while I admit, but it's possible.' The Doctor had placed the spiderling on the edge of the central console and started to operate the controls. The glowing rods inside the transparent tube in the middle of the console began to move slowly up and down.

'There, the TARDIS has left Janus Prime and is now in temporal orbit,' he said.'We can take as long as we like. Sit down, put your feet up, have a cup of tea.'

Lunder had found himself settling into a comfortable armchair.

'There's plenty to read if you get bored,' the Doctor told him, waving a hand at the rows of books nearby. Lunder was starting to feel as though this were a dream or a hallucination brought on by the radiation sickness. But the thought of his cells beginning to slowly unravel from

one another made his heart hammer loudly enough to bring him to his senses. 'This is too surreal,' Lunder muttered as his head began spinning again. 'Haven't you got anything stronger than tea?'

'Well, I've a couple of barrels of Best Old Shobogan in the cellar, but I don't think you're up to it at the moment. You look a little peaky if you ask me.'

For the first time in a long time, Lunder felt himself relax. He actually felt muscles loosening in his neck and shoulders that had remained taut for days on end. He let his head sink back against the chair and closed his eyes.

Immediately he thought of Julya. By now she would have assumed that he was dead, killed in a conflagration that never happened. What would she think when he returned?

Moments later, or perhaps it was hours or even days, he sat up with a jerk. The Doctor was standing over him, in his shirtsleeves, holding something up to the light of a nearby candelabra. After a few seconds Lunder was able to focus on it: an old-fashioned syringe with a glass reservoir and a brass plunger. The Doctor squeezed the syringe minutely and a fine jet of liquid shot out of the needle.

'Good morning,' said the Doctor cheerily as though he had worked through the night. And perhaps he had. 'Just doing my rounds. Roll up your sleeve, would you? Oh, you haven't got one.'

He knelt down brandishing the needle and Lunder pushed himself deeper into the chair.

'Oh don't tell me a big strong lad like you is afraid of a needle?' smiled the Doctor. "That's the trouble with medicine in your era -no one remembers the hands-on approach. It's all computer controlled and pressure-injected.'

'It's not that,' snapped Lunder, feeling unaccountably foolish. With cool deliberation he offered his left forearm and made a fist. 'It's just that I'd like to know what's in it.'

The Doctor tapped rapidly on Lunder's arm to make a vein stand out. "The short answer would be amoxyltriethylene contraradiumdiethylide, or a solution thereof,' he replied, wiping the patch of skin with an antiseptic

swab. 'In effect it's a cocktail of my own making. You know the sort of thing: spiderling enzyme, amino-acid retrochain, eye of newt, wing of bat. In other words, a miracle cure for the radiation sickness. I'm trying to come up with a name for it - how does a Janusian Radbuster sound?'

'Terrible.'

'Hm.' The Doctor didn't mention the hours spent in the TARDIS lab clinking test tubes, tuning electron microscopes and gene-splicers, poring over ancient Gallifreyan biodata records and tomes full of hypothetical chemical formula from umpteen different worlds and as many time zones. The final test, and the most difficult part of the procedure, had been to administer the formula to himself. He spent half the night in a Tibetan healing trance, allowing his Time Lord biochemistry to analyse the prototype solution and modify it as necessary, and then half the night playing with his train set just to be sure there would be no long-term ill effects. Those few hours were relatively short in human medical terms, but for a Time Lord they were all that was required.

Lunder showed no outward sign of discomfort as the Doctor slid the needle carefully into a thick vein and slowly depressed the plunger. Lunder noticed that the Doctor's fingertips were stained with chemicals as he removed the needle and folded his arm back.

'By the way, don't worry about Julya. She'll be delighted to see you again.'

'How did you -'

'You talk in your sleep.'

'I do not.'

'Then you must have been thinking aloud.' The Doctor returned the syringe to an enamelled kidney dish which sat on a tray next to a stoppered bottle full of a colourless liquid. A paper label was stuck to the bottle, with the words .JANUSIAN RADIATION - THE CURE written on it in copperplate.

Lunder stood up stiffly, stretched, and dragged a hand down the small growth of beard on his jaw. A thought struck him. 'Doctor, we must've been away for a day and a half at least...'

The Doctor glanced up from the controls, where his long fingers were flicking switches and pushing buttons with great dexterity.'So?'

'So I think we're going to be too late. Your friend Sam was in a poor way when we left Menda.'

''We'll get there in time, don't worry.'

Lunder stepped up on to the plinth.'How can you be sure?'

'I'll make sure.' He made a series of tiny adjustments to a row of dials and switches.'IVe brought the TARDIS out of temporal orbit just before we left Janus Prime.'

'That's impossible.'

'No, it's just frowned upon, that's all.' The time rotor ground to a halt as the TARDIS materialised. The Doctor collected his syringe and the little bottle of serum, throwing them into an old Gladstone bag. Then he snatched his coat off a nearby hat stand and headed for the doors.

'Wait,' said Lunder.'What do we tell them when we arrive?'

'Leave all the talking to me.'

'That shouldn't be difficult. What shall I do?'

The Doctor gave him a playful punch on the shoulder. 'You've always been a man of action, Lunder. You could start by turning your swords into ploughshares.'

Chapter Twenty
The Hard Road

Sam woke late, which wasn't like her. She had her old watch on, which said it was 5.25, but that was TARDIS time and could have been morning or afternoon.

On Menda, it was definitely morning.

She could hear the birdsong through the open window of her room, a mid-range chep chep chep close enough for her to want to get out of bed and take a look. There were trees outside her :tK>m, native Mendan trees by the look of the golden bark and square leaves, and somewhere in the tangle of branches was the bird, singing its little heart out. It wasn't much of a song, but something about it made Sam happy.

She stretched and yawned and gently ran her fingers over her scalp. She still had some hair but it was patchy. Maybe she could just shave it right off in a few days when her skin was a little less tender and start again.

'Feeling better?' asked the Doctor.

He was standing behind her holding a tray. 'Breakfast; he said. 'Toast, marmalade, cronilla juice and a fresh pot of tea.'

The door to her room was still shut. She hadn't even heard it open or close. How did he do that?

'They offered eggs and bacon, but I didn't think you'd appreciate it.' The Doctor set the tray down on the end of her bed, carefully so that the rumpled blankets didn't tip it too far. Then he picked up the pot and poured two mugs of tea.

'I didn't think they'd still have teapots in the twenty-third century,' said Sam.

'You'd be amazed what they still have in the twenty-third century,' he replied. 'Love, hate, paper tissues, the common cold... Unfortunately the colonists forgot to pack a teapot when they left Earth, so I had to fetch this one from the TARDIS.'

'Cheat.'

The Doctor grinned good-naturedly. 'Oh, I almost forgot: I found this for you, too.' He reached into a pocket and took out a slim tube of stiff material which, with a flick of his wrist, unfurled into a light Panama hat.

Sam took it and put it on her head. It smelled of summer and old cricket pavilions. It was a little bit big for her, but at least it hid the worst of her alopecia.'Thanks.'

'Don't mention it. It's good to see you feeling better, Sam.'

She sat on the edge of the bed next to him and sipped her tea.'It was pretty dose this time, wasn't it?'

He smiled. 'Yes, I suppose it was.'

Sam stared over the rim of her mug into space. 'You mustVe arrived just in time. I remember passing out in the Link room waiting for you, but... I really thought it was the end, you know.'

The Doctor said nothing. He nibbled on a piece of toast instead. It was a week now - Mendan time, which made it about nine or ten Earth days - since he had returned from Janus Prime with Lunder and the cure for the radiation sickness. He had treated Sam first, because she was closest to dying. The infection in her shoulder had weakened her so much that the effects of the radiation had been unusually severe, the toxins that attacked the body's lipids running unchecked. The result of his spiderling serum had not been guaranteed - even he knew that. But tweaking the time differential between leaving Janus Prime and materialising on Menda was as far as he could go, perhaps further than he should, to ensure that Sam had at least a fighting chance of survival.

As it was, the coma had lasted five days. It was quickly evident that the cellular deterioration had been halted, but damage had still been done. Sam retained only a little of her hair, and her skin looked dry and was peeling badly as if sunburnt. Gradually her body would repair itself, however, and the hair would grow back. She would be stiff and sore for a few more days but eventually she would recover without lasting physical harm. Unlike Varko and Blakt, whom he had also treated. Their condition had been halted also but it was too late for their bodies to overcome the terrible physical trauma. They would both remain terribly scarred for the rest of their lives.

He got up and walked over to the window.'What a lovely day,' he said. The bird in the tree outside twittered as if agreeing with him.

'Are you going to tell me what happened on Janus Prime?' asked Sam. 'I mean, properly. No technobabble.'

'Sergeant Moslei gave his life for us,' the Doctor said, without turning from the window. He watched the bird fly into the branches of the tree and disappear amid the foliage. 'He stepped into the Link and his bodymass collapsed it.'

'I don't know whether I liked him or not,' said Sam.

The Doctor said nothing. 'He did the right thing in the end.'

'He left his change of heart a bit late, didn't he?'

'He allowed me to save you. I'll always be grateful; said the Doctor, simply. He watched the bird fly out of the tree and then return with a scrap of straw in its beak. Building a nest, getting ready for the summer months, probably looking for a mate. On the surface it appeared to be a life of beautiful and rewarding simplicity. But there were always problems. Where to build a good nest? What materials to use? Where can I find a mate? And what happens if someone chooses to cut down this tree? He said, 'Moslei's change of heart occurred some time ago - he just hadn't realised. It was Lunder who convinced him, after I had left for Janus Prime. Lunder tried to follow me, to rescue me before Julya... well, you know. Moslei actually thought that I had fled Menda to get back to the TARDIS and escape. It was only when he knew Lunder was trying to go after me that he realised I was serious about stopping Zemler.'

The bird was back again, with more straw. For now, its worries were over.

'First decent brew I've had since we got here,' Sam said happily, and finished the last of her tea with a gulp. 'How is Lunder?'

'Fine. I told him about my time with UNIT - he seemed quite impressed, for some reason.'

'Boys will be boys. They all love talking about soldiers and fighting.'

The Doctor laughed. 'He'll grow out of it. There won't be much call for soldiering on Menda now.'

'Another happy ending, then.'

'Yes. I never tire of them, do you?' He had not failed to notice that Sam had avoided inquiring after Julya. Perhaps that was only to be expected in the circumstances. Her decision to save Menda at all costs had included his own life, and Lunder's, in the price. He knew that Sam would find it hard to forgive her that.

Sam stretched again, long and easily like a cat. 'I thought I might try to go for a run this morning,' she said. 'Blow away the cobwebs and all that.'

'Haven't you had enough of cobwebs?' he teased. 'I've a better idea. We'll go for a picnic.'

'A picnic?'

The Doctor bounded enthusiastically over to the door.'Of course! It's a beautiful day. Fresh air,countryside, a nice walk... What could be better?'

***

One hour later they left Newtown in a skimmer, the Doctor at the wheel. Sam sat next to him, with Lunder and Julya in the back. The Doctor had insisted that they come along as well, although he had to explain the concept of a picnic to them as this was something that had, apparently, failed to make it into twenty-third-century culture. The Doctor said it was high time the practice was reintroduced.

Sam, he could tell, was not overly impressed with his choice of company for the trip. In truth he had invited them on a last-minute whim after bumping into them outside the council chambers.

They had been arguing, of course, although not fiercely. The second Lunder had noticed the Doctor and Sam approach he had called out to them,'Doctor! Tell her she's wrong.'

The Doctor had looked at Julya and said,'You're wrong.'

Julya sighed. 'You're both invited to a special service tonight in the

Wreck. It's a sort of thank-you, and a celebration.'

'A party?' Sam asked, arching an eyebrow.

'Lunder says you won't come.'

'Who knows?' smiled the Doctor. 'It's impossible to predict the future unless you've actually seen it.'

'I told you he'd say no,' said Lunder.

'He's a Time Lord,' Julya growled with forced patience. 'He probably bos seen the future.'

The Doctor had chosen this moment to announce his picnic and invite them along.

'What's a picnic?' asked Lunder.

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They drove out of town and into the hills overlooking Newtown. The Doctor parked the skimmer in an open meadow beyond the outlying farms and they put a blanket down near a small copse of trees. The hamper they had brought consisted mainly of local produce - bread, fruit, cheese. There was also a flask of wine -force-distilled from Mendan grapes - which they drank from paper cups. Sam thought it was too dry but the Doctor, declaring it 'enthusiastic but inexperienced', asked if he could take a bottle for the TARDIS cellar.

The sun was warm and orange, the sky a deep green dotted with high, distant clouds. Sam was grateful for her Panama hat, shielding her from the sunlight, and also for the loose, plain clothes given to her by the Mendans, because they didn't chafe against her still raw skin. She felt comfortable and cool. It was nice to feel the soft Mendan grass beneath her bare toes as well. It was such a long way from Janus Prime. Even Lunder had forsaken his usual combat fatigues for a pair of canvas jeans and a shirt.

'So,' Sam said quietly to Lunder as he sat looking broodily at the tip of his cigar,'looking forward to a life dusting crops?'

He gave her his lopsided grin, but there was steel beneath it. 'It isn't

funny. All I've ever known is fighting. What use am I now to a bunch of farmers?'

'You could always frighten the birds away from the crops,' she mused. Then she leaned forward. 'Come with me and the Doctor.' Sam surprised herself with the impromptu offer.'We could take you back to Earth.'

He shook his head. 'Nan. I made my choice when I decided to help the colonists fight Zemler. I always go for the hard road.'

Sam eyed him thoughtfully. 'And that's the only reason you're staying?'

'Can you give me another reason?'

Sam raised her eyebrows at him. Was she the only one to have noticed that Julya couldn't stop looking at Lunder ever since his miraculous return from certain death? Surely not even this muscle-brained lump could have failed to spot it.

'Who's for a walk?' asked the Doctor, suddenly, jumping to his feet. Lunder shook his head, raising a half-full cup of wine, while Julya murmured a sleepy,'No thanks.'

'Come on, Sam, let's walk off all that wine,' urged the Doctor, hauling his companion to her feet.

'I haven't drunk that much! Honestly...'

Lunder and Julya watched them go, Sam's complaints gradually fading into the distance as she and the Doctor reached the tree line.

'Funny pair,' said Julya.

'Think so?'

'They obviously adore each other, but there's nothing going on between them.'

'How do you know?'

'I can tell.'

Lunder just smiled and rested his head back on the rug.

'Lunder?' asked Julya.

'Yes?'

***

When they reached the edge of the copse, the Doctor paused to put his coat on and look back down the gentle hill to the scene of the picnic. He smiled slightly as he watched Julya bend down and kiss Lunder full on the lips.

'Why, you old romantic,' said Sam. 'You brought them out here deliberately, didn't you?'

'Did I?' asked the Doctor.

Sam smiled and followed him as he headed into the trees. 'What if they don't hit it off?'

'They won't know unless they try.'

The Doctor led her through the trees until they reached a sunny clearing on the far side. In the middle of the glade was the solid blue shape of an old police box, dappled by the sunlight. The Doctor was already hooking out the TARDIS key from his waistcoat pocket.

'Wait a sec,' protested Sam.'What about the service tonight? The party? We'll be missed!'

'I know. But I've seen the future...' The Doctor opened the TARDIS door.'And we don't go.'

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